192 PAGES

ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION

MAY 1989
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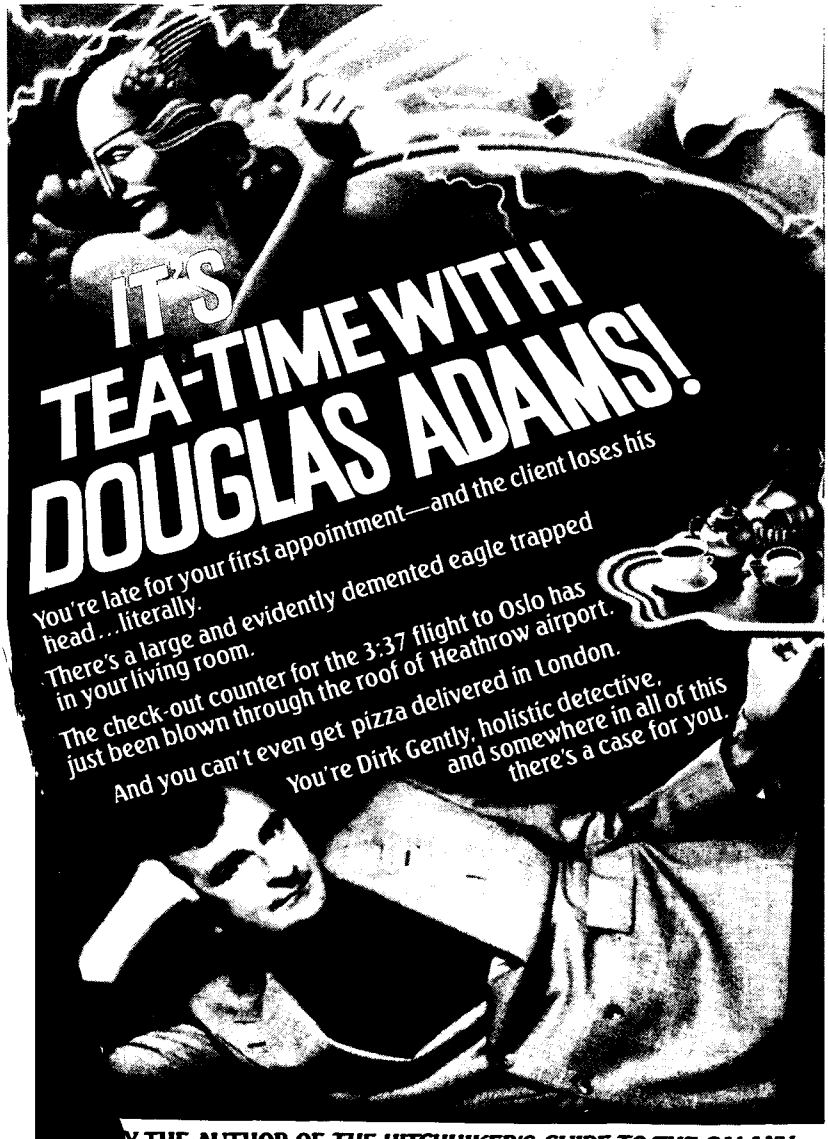
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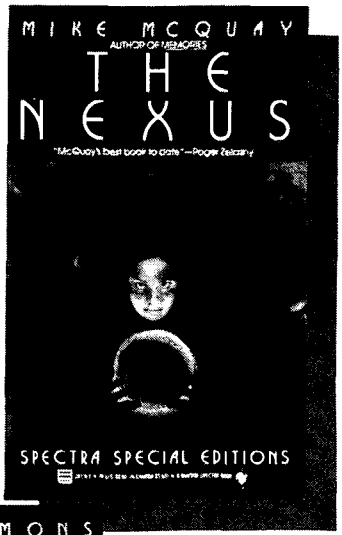

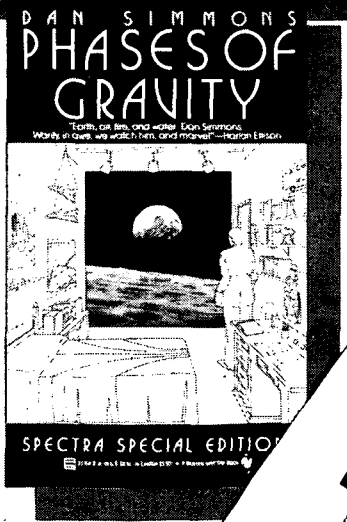

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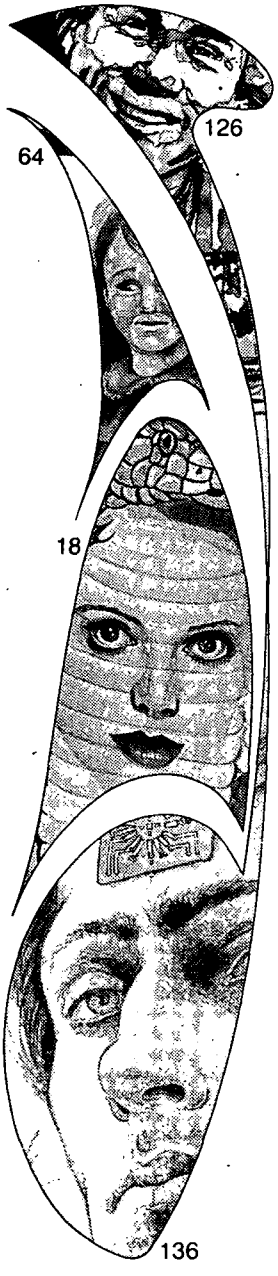

ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION

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EDITORIAL

COSMOPOLITAN

by Isaac Asimov

In the last week (as I write this), I have had three foreign visitors: an Australian, a Norwegian, and a Chinese. This was not easy for me, for I have no natural abilities as a host. My mind is usually on whatever it is I am at that moment writing (and I am at every moment writing); I am therefore uncomfortably aware of the passage of the time and keep taking surreptitious glances at my watch; and while I don't rush them off, I have never been known to urge people to stay if they seem to show an inclination to leave.

In fact, when I can, I refuse to see would-be visitors, explaining, in all truthfulness, that I am up to my ears in work.

It is, however, difficult to refuse foreigners. First, there is the feeling that they have come a long way (though, I am sure, not *just* to see me) and one doesn't like to disappoint them. Second, there is the natural feeling that in your relations with foreigners, you represent your country, and while I don't mind having someone say, "Gee, that Asimov is an inhospitable chap!" I don't want anyone saying, "Golly, but Americans are standoffish and nasty." Third, I don't travel, so that foreigners never see me even though they are important segments of my readership, and it seems only fair that they see me if they take the trouble to come to me.

Fourth, and by far the most important, it seems to me that the tendency of foreigners to want to see me points up something I have always believed—that science fiction is a binding force the world over.

This is true of literature and art in general, of course, for the creativity of human beings touches the chords of similarity far more than it displays the variability of difference. Homer wrote nearly three millennia ago, and dealt with people of a civilization and culture long dead, but I defy anyone to read him in a good modern English translation without realizing that these are recognizable people he's presenting us with.

However, I have the sneaking suspicion that science fiction as a genre is somehow more cosmopolitan than other forms of creative endeavor. A science fiction writer can't free himself from his culture

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and his intellectual environment any more than anyone else can. No one can read my stories without realizing that I am an American —and a member of what we might call the intellectual class, as a further subdivision. All my characters, almost without exception, are clearly American intellectuals.

Nevertheless, the mere fact that I write science fiction tends to make me think of the Earth as a tiny globe, and dims my view of human beings as being divided into 150 nationalities and an indefinite number of cultural divisions.

I tend to manipulate volumes of space so much larger than the Earth that it becomes impossible for me to worry about the subsections of a pinhead. I deal with dangers that cannot possibly affect one small region of a microcosm and not others. I don't deal with the efforts of one nation to destroy another, but with a supernova, let us say, that may destroy all of humanity through radiation, and that cannot choose among its divisions.

It seems to me, then, that those who read science fiction anywhere on the globe are forced into a greater sense of kinship than if they read something else. Even Homer speaks of Achaeans and Trojans, but science fiction writers tend to deal with Earthpeople or, even more vastly and impersonally, with "intelligences."

(Please don't bother pointing out that there are exceptions to this and that it is quite possible for science fiction to be petty and chau-

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vinistic. There are all kinds and divisions of science fiction, of course, but I am speaking of what I call "good science fiction" or "serious science fiction," or, if I'm sure no one is listening, "the kind of science fiction *I* write.")

Those science fiction writers of note who, unlike me, *do* travel must therefore find that they are welcome everywhere.

Now don't get me wrong, I am perfectly aware that movie actors, rock-and-roll musicians, sports figures, politicians, British royalty, and other subdivisions of humanity can attract shrieking crowds wherever they go anywhere in the world. They will attract a hundred thousand for every one a science fiction writer attracts. The reaction to these glamor figures, however, strikes me as being purely visceral. They exert their attraction through repetitious familiarity, and through mob contagion, and the adulation, given and received, may produce pleasure and short-term effects, but accomplishes nothing of long-term importance.

Science fiction writers are not the beneficiaries of mass-glamor, however, but exert their attraction through the stimulation of thought, which is why we attract so few when we compare ourselves to rock-and-rollers.

What's more, the thought we stimulate, whether we deliberately intend it or not, is in the direction of globalism. We are the true cosmopolitans and, in a world in which humanity faces many problems that threaten us all alike and that will yield (if at all) only to solutions on the global, and not the national, level, anything that tends to stimulate globalism strikes me as good.

Although I write on many subjects and am a card-carrying scientist, I am known chiefly through my science fiction writing. This is not a source of frustration to me. I do not cry out, "But I'm actually a scientist and I've written important books on science." I *want* to be known as a science fiction writer because that strikes me as far more important, and as far more useful to my aims in life.

It is because I am a science fiction writer, and for no other reason, that I am read the world over. It is because I am a science fiction writer, and for no other reason, that I am constantly being interviewed on all sorts of arcane subjects and treated as though I had some special crystal ball that enabled me to see the future. And I take advantage of all this to advance my opinions as to what humanity ought or ought not do.

I would have no such opportunity if I were merely a scientist, or if I wrote all the books I do write, leaving out only the science fiction.

And the interviews, mind you, come not only from American sources but from foreign sources as well. This is true, I am sure, in the case of all serious science fiction writers.

I am especially pleased that I am frequently called by Soviet report-

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A NOVEL

GARFIELD REEVES-STEVENS

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ers for my views on this and that. The pleasure arises first from the fact that I was born in Russia and it is a nice feeling to know that the land (which I left at the age of not quite three) is aware of my existence. Secondly, the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union can lead to results that are certainly the most appalling we can imagine, and I feel it important to speak of globalism, and of the defusion of national rivalries and prejudices, to *both* nations.

In this connection I recall, with invariable amusement, one particular Soviet interview a few years ago. A group of Soviet newsmen brought portable television cameras with them and asked me to walk in Central Park with them. (I live right at the edge of the park.) As we sauntered across the Sheep Meadow, one of them asked me questions, and I answered, and the others, with cameras and sound equipment, followed along and recorded voice and image.

I was perfectly amenable, and for half an hour, I spoke of peace and brotherhood and of international friendship and cooperation. I spoke of the thirteen American states that gained independence in 1776 and then voluntarily gave up some of their powers to form a federal union, and held them up as an example to the world.

My dear wife, Janet, had come with us, and had sat down on a park bench while the rest of us walked on.

Then, when the interview was over, the interviewer said to me, "Thank you, Dr. Asimov. Now that we are done, I suppose you can return to your wife."

I looked up, and there she was, about a hundred yards away, waving her arm and smiling at me.

Now Janet is by nature a very shy girl, but it is impossible for anyone to associate with me and remain shy. When I saw her waving, I ran toward her with my arms outstretched, and she automatically ran toward me with her arms also outstretched.

We met at the half-way point and went into our usual clinch and kissed each other. (I never pay any attention to possible onlookers since I am so self-centered that I'm not aware of them; and Janet has somehow learned to indulge me.)

It was only afterward that Janet told me that the Soviet cameraman had run briskly along after me and had recorded it all. So both Janet and I feel that in the Soviet Union, after the viewers listen solemnly to my lecture on globalism, they end by saying, "Gee, American couples love each other just the way we do."

And maybe that's a good thing, too. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov,

In your January 1986 editorial, "Old Hundredth" you said "After the first issue of *Galaxy Science Fiction,* dated October, 1950, hit the newsstands, dozens of still newer science fiction magazines have been launched, and during the thirty-five years that have elapsed, only *Asimov*'s has lasted as many as a hundred issues."

Well, I nearly wrote to you then, but I thought some other pedantic reader of yours would save me the trouble. Then today I noticed in your April 1987 issue (which I've only just got around to reading) the following: "Since the end of 1950, dozens of science fiction magazines have been launched and we are the first in thirty-six years to manage to survive to celebrate a tenth anniversary."

Does Summer 1952 ring any bells? *Fantastic* was launched on that date and lasted until 1980. It has published more fantasy than many SF magazines, certainly, but its one-time title of *Fantastic Science Fiction* and the line on the spine "Great Science Fiction" showed where its heart and readers were. It lasted 208 issues all told, so you still have six years to go.

That said, I do think you are the longest surviving magazine launched since then. And a worthy one; the best of the current American SF magazines. So congratulations anyway, and I hope you don't mind my nit-picking.

Sincerely,

Mike Christie
Brecon, Powys
Wales

No, I don't mind. Truth is truth and I had forgotten about Fantastic. *I think* If *might be considered, too. However, we now have a little under five years to go and, with avoidance of catastrophe, we might make it.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

Just when I think I've had my fill of stories rife with unfulfilled adolescent sexual yearnings and I'm prepared to let my subscription lapse, I am pleasantly surprised by an issue or two which make me reach for my checkbook and a twenty-five cent stamp. The May, July, and August 1988 issues (I know that's three) contain some of the best SF stories I have read in a long time. John Barnes' "The Limit of Vision" was particularly gratifying, including not only a maturely written sex scene, but an intriguing vision of the future.

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Which brings me to the main point of my letter.

I have read with a mixture of amusement and incredulity the various attempts to create alternative realities out of world history. I really couldn't put my finger on what was bothering me about these stories until I read Frederik Pohl's "Waiting for the Olympians" in the August 1988 issue. Not only does Pohl create a believable alternate history, but he includes a moral lesson as well. The real genius of the novella, however, is that Pohl explains within the story itself how a sci-rom author (sci-fi in our reality) should go about constructing that alternate world. In short—take a single event which changed history and proceed from there. Unfortunately, he does not demonstrate in detail the course of events from that point onwards. I have a sneaking suspicion, however, that Pohl's story was meant not only to entertain his readers but to instruct his colleagues.

Perhaps the worst offender of logic and reasonability in constructing these alternate realities is Orson Scott Card. I have only read "Runaway" (June 1987) and "Carthage City" (September 1987), but I have glanced at *Seventh Son* in the bookstore (mostly at the map inside the front cover) and am not at all inclined to buy it. My objection is quite simple. It would appear (though I am not at all sure) that the divergence from the common timeline occurred about the time of the English Civil War (1640-1650) and the Protectorate of the Cromwells (1650-1660). It would appear also that the French and Indian War was a draw and that the American Revolution was not successful in all of the colonies. The problem with this is that the chain of events started in the mid-seventeenth century could very well have changed the course of history so that there was no French and Indian War at all, or there was no American Revolution. These wider historical events, whatever they are called, are plausible, however, and I'm willing to let that go by. What really disturbs me is the inclusion of historical figures in settings in which they may not have existed due to the change of history. William Henry Harrison as a frontier governor is plausible—if nothing in the change of history had affected the Harrison family line since 1660 (some four generations). Even more intriguing are the possibilities that Thomas Jefferson's great-grandfather did not immigrate to Virginia in the 1670s as a result of the change a decade earlier. Likewise, Andrew Jackson's father immigrated to South Carolina in 1765 from Northern Ireland—but what if the change in the 1600s had resulted in no Scotsmen settling in Ulster in the 1680s and 1690s? Would an Andrew Jackson still have existed to father the seventh President? I could go on, but will only say that even the use of place names from real American history, slightly altered (Hio for Ohio), is even more ridiculous. The considerations affecting the choice of place names would also have been different in an alternative world. Unfortunately, the only character in this alternate reality who is interesting from a "what could have been?" standpoint is "Armor of God Weaver." Not enough

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about this man, who apparently has no counterpart in our world, is presented in either of Card's stories.

The lesson in all of this is to do your historical homework if you want to include well known figures in your alternate reality. Harry Turtledove's alternate "sim-world" does not encounter as many problems as Card's world, due mainly to the fact that he avoids the traps into which Card has fallen. The only negative thing I have to say about Turtledove's world is that all one has to do is substitute native-Americans for the sims and much of the oppression and other relations between the two cultures seems all too familiar. Perhaps this is intentional and if it is to raise consciousness I applaud it.

Of course, if this genre is called fantasy rather than sci-fi, I suppose that anything goes. Perhaps I'm prejudiced by some of my favorite "Star Trek" episodes, like Harlan Ellison's "The City on the Edge of Forever," D.C. Fontana's "Tomorrow is Yesterday," and Gene Roddenberry's and Art Wallace's "Assignment: Earth." All of these stories were alternate history tales. Isn't it about time some guidelines were laid down for this type of story? I've been reading science fiction since I was eleven (starting with *Pebble in the Sky*) and I will defer to your opinion as to what is reasonable. I should warn you that I spoiled *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *The Princess Bride* for my friends by pointing out that uniformed and armed Nazis would not have been flying in and out of Cairo in the 1930s and that Australia was unknown to medieval Europeans. Be that as it may, I would appreciate your comments on the alternate world problem and its place in science fiction.

Gordon L. Remington
305 Third Avenue #8
SLC, UT 84103

Despite the fact that psychohistory has made me famous and well-to-do, I am quite convinced that human history is chaotic. In other words, if you were to go back a few centuries and change one significant event, the present state of history would be quite unrecognizable and unpredictable. That, however, does not make for good drama. You might just as well create a completely new world. Therefore, one clings to the fiction that the present world remains recognizable with amusing/ interesting/dramatic changes.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Dozois, Dr. Asimov, and all,

In a spirit of strict fairness I wanted to retract something I said in a previous letter, viz, that I haven't liked anything in *Asimov's* for years. Untrue, untrue! I really liked the Gilgamesh series, and Harry Turtledove has had a few gems as well. Alas, I must also mention the unspeakable "script" for *I, Robot: The Movie* which marred your pages last winter. It was redolent with the same sort of self-conscious hyperdrama which made me flee, barfing, from *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Can't please 'em all, can you? So, why do I subscribe, anyway? Because I love SF so much

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that even bad SF is better than nothing.

This letter isn't precisely as apologetic as planned, I now see. Well, I'm sorry to contribute to the garbage crisis in New York, but I'm mailing it anyway.

Yours truly,

Pierre Mihok
Don Mills, Ontario
Canada

As a loyal New York patriot, and fervent one-world advocate, I hereby deny forcefully that there is a garbage crisis in New York. There is, however, a garbage crisis on Earth and pollution reaches out even to the fair environs of Don Mills.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

Please pass on to Eric Vinicoff my compliments for his story "The Great Martian Railroad Race." As a longtime science fiction fan and a life-long model railroader and rail fan, I enjoyed his work both as a science fiction story and as a railroad story. I assume he got his inspiration from the building of the transcontinental railroad in 1869. All of the elements were there from the land grants that financed the project down to one line being built by the Chinese and the other built by the Irish. I also liked the cover art by Gary Freeman and the story art by Bob Walters. Both are good representations of 1870's railroad locomotives.

I would like to suggest, if such things are possible, that Mr. Vinicoff submit his story to model railroad and rail fan type publications (along with the art work of Mr. Freeman and Mr. Walters). I feel the readers of such magazines would find the story enjoyable strictly as a railroad story. Plus, while modelers would find building a maglev train like the one Mr. Vinicoff described difficult, some may be inspired by the story artwork to build their own version of Promontory Point on Mars. Don't laugh, many modelers including myself have done stranger things in the hobby.

I have been a subscriber to *IAsfm* for about ten years and my collection goes back to Volume 1 Number 1. Mr. Freeman's story has reinforced my desire and determination to continue my subscription for as long as I am able to read it.

Sincerely Yours,

Dean A. Zook
Corona, CA

In December 1978, I went from New York to California and back by train. That might sound as though I qualify as a railroad buff myself, but truth compels me to explain that I did it for negative reasons. I simply won't fly.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Ever since I discovered SF, in my early teens in Rome, Italy, I have been an avid reader of your stories. Only a few weeks ago I discovered your *IAsfm* and was thrilled when I read your short introduction to the use of the word "psychohistory."

Psychohistory has been an idea that has intrigued me for quite a few years. Often I wish I could have

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included it in my Master Thesis (a short eighty page dissertation on the cyclical and linear views of history in Eastern and Western cultures), but unfortunately there is no real academic work done on this fascinating subject.

What I would like to do, if you can help me, is to find out if there are other people who, like me, are seriously interested in developing or sponsoring academic research into innovative historical science.

From Toynbee to the Bible there have been innumerable "views" and "explanations" of human history. What I would like to know is if there are individuals or institutions willing to approach the understanding of human events in new, unorthodox and innovative ways.

Do you think I am asking too much? If you are aware of any individual or group working on a field even remotely similar to a "science of history" would you let me know? Anyone seriously interested in developing the idea of psychohistory from a historical, psychological, literary, or philosophical viewpoint, may reach me at the address below.

Thank you for your inspiring novels and good stories. I will continue to be an enthusiastic reader of all your work.

Sincerely yours

Guido G. DeCanevaro
c/o Kimberley Inc.
P.O. Box 1616
Rockefeller Center Station
New York, NY 10185

In early 1988, there was a two-part article in our esteemed sister magazine, Analog, *on attempts to analyze history and society in a psychohistoric fashion.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

This letter is not to tell you that you got the idea of moving expressways from Robert Heinlein, but that an excellent description of the moving strips is to be found in the book *Auf zwei Planeten,* written by Kurd Lasswitz in 1897. Each of his strips moved about three meters per second faster than the previous one up to the fastest middle strip, on which the traveler could move at 60 meters per second. Whether or not this was a first, I believe Mr. Lasswitz's description of a number of subsidiary points used in many science fiction stories as well as his descriptions of the auto, the airplane, and radio communications in 1897 leave little doubt as to his visionary ability. From this you may note that your editorials are read as well as the excellent stories.

Sincerely,

W. Lynn Hunt
Chapel Hill, NC

It always distresses me when I read of plot devices and gimmicks used a century ago. It makes me feel that it is impossible for an ingenious writer to feel safe. Our ideas get stolen even before we are born.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I just had to tell you how much I enjoy reading your magazine.

The stories are always very interesting. I have been working

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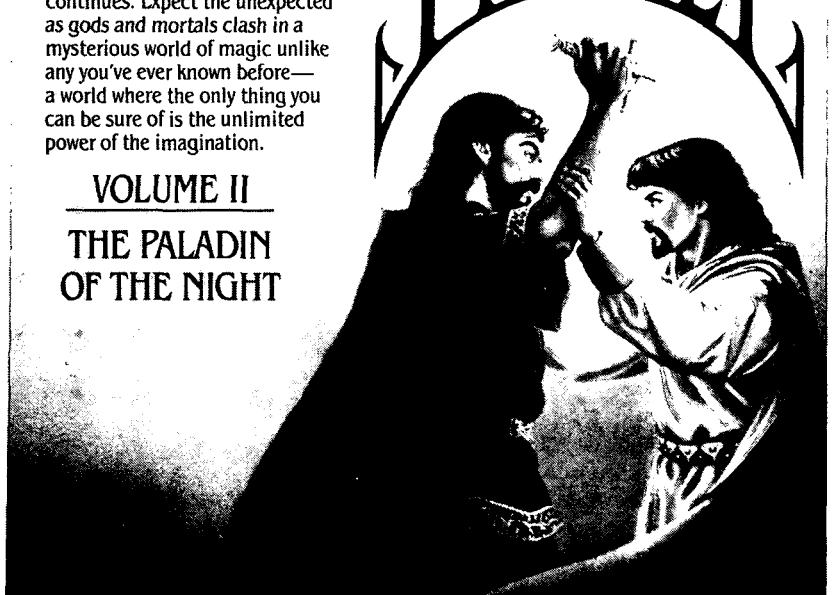

MARGARET WEIS AND TRACY HICKMAN

authors of the bestselling DARKSWORD TRILOGY

SPECTRA BANTAM

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(sort of) on a short story for the past two years and, if I must admit to my shortcomings, I'm not getting very far. Reading your magazine gives me the right incentive to continue, especially when I see stories that are "a first." I think to myself "maybe some day." Then a little voice (which I am beginning to abhor!) says "What a wimp. Why don't you just forget it and go back to being the wife and mother that you're supposed to be!" But after reading the story "Do Ya, Do Ya, Wanna Dance" by Howard Waldrop, I thought maybe some day there would be a chance for me (oh, sure). There is that voice again.

Well, enough about me. I just wanted to tell you how much I enjoy reading your magazine and how it has given me a lot of incentive. Who knows, maybe some day I'll be sending you a story (oh, sure!). There's that voice again.

Thank you, Dr. Asimov, for giving me the incentive.

Mrs. Patricia Quay
407 S Locust St
Lititz, PA 17543

Look, do you enjoy dancing? When you dance do you wonder if you're going to be the next Ginger Rogers? Do you feel there's no point in dancing unless you can be? No, you just enjoy dancing for its own sake. That's the way people ought to look at writing. If it's enjoyable, do it. That's what counts. Then send it on to us. Even if we reject it, you've still had your fun, you see.

—Isaac Asimov

I probably won't be the first to point this out. . . . In Norman Spinrad's welcome eulogy of J.G. Ballard's work (June issue) he might with advantage have mentioned that "The Assassination of JFK Considered as a Downhill Motor Race" is an *hommage* to Alfred Jarry's "The Passion Considered as an Uphill Bicycle Race" of about 1902. Jarry also wrote *inter alia* an "article" on constructing a time machine. . . . The connection between absurdism/surrealism and SF goes back a *long* way!

John Brunner
South Petherton, Somerset
England

I would write an editorial on the distinction between satirizing an author, writing a pastiche, and offering an hommage, *but I'm not quite sure of the distinction myself. I will say this, though, that when there is a perfectly good English word, "homage," the use of the French* "hommage" *strikes me as an affectation.*

—Isaac Asimov

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NEAT STUFF

by Matthew J. Costello

Topic number one in the world of comics is the *Batman* movie. As you read this, the film will have finished principal photography in London, but I doubt whether the storm and fury has died down. Most of the fretting up to now has gone on inside the pages of the *Comic Buyer's Guide,* the respected weekly newspaper devoted to the world of comics.

At first, the Batman film, due from Warner Bros., was exciting news, coming on the heels of the tremendous publicity created by Frank Miller's revisionist look at a middle-aged Batman, *The Dark Knight Returns.* The Caped Crusader of the Dark Knight series was, as most of America knows by now, an overweight, boozy, and discouraged crimefighter living in a city where our worst urban nightmares had become fact.

Then, when Warner Bros. confirmed that Jack Nicholson was going to play the Joker in the film (with a rumored great script by Sam Hamm), fans were thrilled. Who better to play the wildly leering arch criminal?

Then "disturbing" news arrived, and the *Comic Buyer's Guide*'s readers started filling its pages devoted to letters. Michael Keaton, a comic actor who played *Beetlejuice* and *Mr. Mom,* was going to be Batman! And Tim Burton, who directed Pee Wee Herman in his *Big Adventure* and also directed *Beetlejuice,* would direct.

At once, the opportunity for a serious Batman film seemed out the window. The studio seemed to have placed the film as a crazy comedy, using a comic actor and a comic director, and the Dark Knight wouldn't be returning, at least to the big screen. Most of the letters railed about the director and star, some suggesting a letter-writing campaign. A few argued that Keaton, based on his tremendous dramatic performance in *Clean and Sober,* could do the role straight. Some said that he just doesn't have the stature . . . the build to even *look* like Batman.

And others said what's the big deal? It's only a movie. Life goes on. And that's when the stalwart editors of the *CBG,* Don and Maggie Thompson, took their stand. It does matter, they explained. The last Batman fad painted the whole medium with such a broad stroke of juvenalia and idiocy, that it's taken this long for the medium to

(Continued on page 182)

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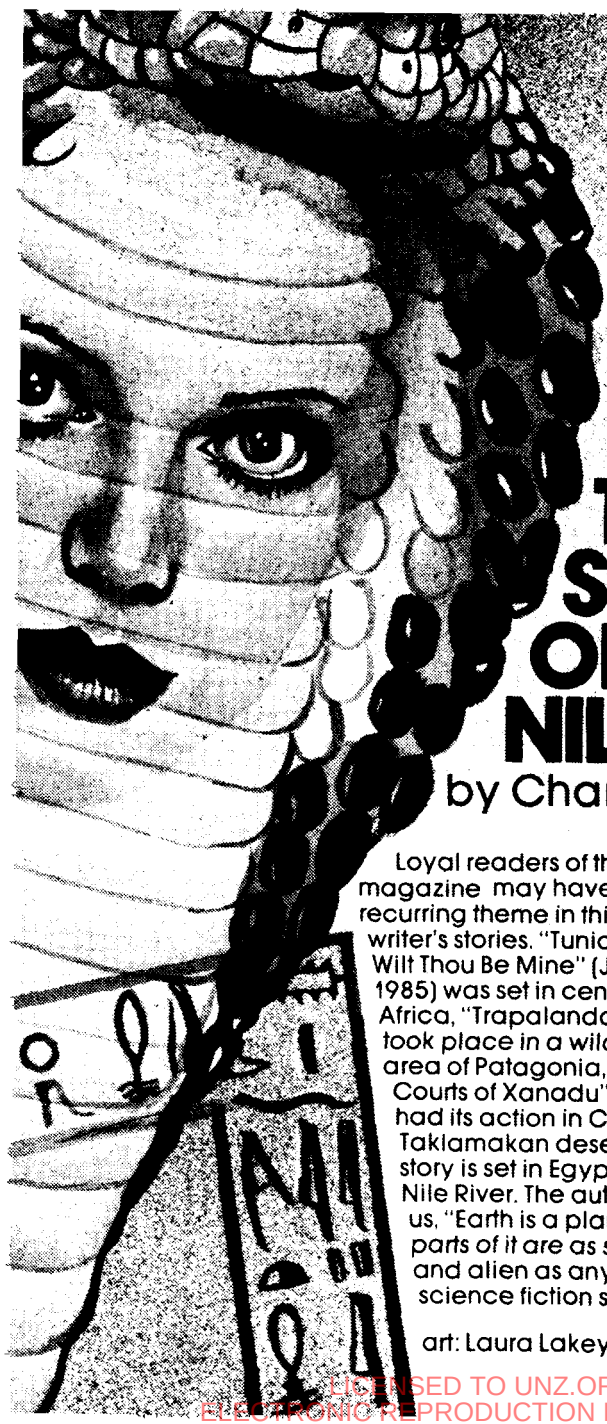

THE SERPENT OF OLD NILE

by Charles Sheffield

Loyal readers of the magazine may have noticed a recurring theme in this writer's stories. "Tunicate, Tunicate, Wilt Thou Be Mine" (June 1985) was set in central Africa, "Trapalanda" (June 1987) took place in a wilderness area of Patagonia, "The Courts of Xanadu" (April 1988) had its action in China's Taklamakan desert, and this story is set in Egypt on the Nile River. The author tells us, "Earth is a planet, too, and parts of it are as strange and alien as any science fiction setting."

art: Laura Lakey

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"Egypt is an acquired country, the gift of the river."
—Herodotus (about 450 B.C.)

The River Nile runs the whole length of Egypt, from the Sudanese border to the Mediterranean Sea. The river bisects the country. More than that, it *defines* the country.

To Geoff Barlow, crouched over the map sheet in the hot and stifling office, the whole of Egypt became no more than the hinterland of the Nile. The eastern and western deserts had been appropriately colored as a drab tan on the map, dotted sparsely with the names of oases and tiny villages. By contrast, the bright reds and greens of settlements and irrigation projects blossomed everywhere along the river, from the Aswan High Dam in the south up to Cairo and the fertile triangle of the delta. The hand-colored green patches grew every month. Like a living organism, the great river was extending thin new tentacles of agriculture east and west. A ten-thousand-year truce was ending as the ancient narrow strip of Nile Valley irrigation broadened, and desert lands were claimed for crops.

But not claimed without a struggle; and it was not the desert itself that was resisting.

The intercom gave another angry, waspish buzz. Barlow sighed, laid down the marker with which he had been tracing the new boundary of the El Sabakhaya irrigation line, and stood up from the light-table.

The walk from one trailer to the next was only a dozen paces, but the shock of summer noontime hit like a blow. He stood on the trailer steps and squinted down at his feet. He could see no shadow, though the yellow sky was glaring and empty of cloud. With the camp only a degree or so from the Tropic of Cancer, at July midday the sun stood almost directly overhead.

He shielded his eyes and looked south. The miles-long grey bar of the Aswan High Dam sat there, three hundred and sixty feet high and shimmering in the heat. Invisible behind it lay the great expanse of Lake Nasser, a man-made water body reaching all the way into Sudan; and beyond that, the Nile, the Father of Waters, sprawling its serpent length another three thousand miles upriver, to its source in the headwaters of the Luvironza River.

If Geoff stood there for an hour, he would feel no perspiration. The air was so dry that sweat evaporated as it left his pores. But he could feel heat—frightening heat—and the noise of the gasoline motor providing power to both trailers produced an abrasive roar that was truly nerve-racking. After a quick look north along the river itself, Geoff stepped over the mess of cables connecting the trailers and stepped up into the larger structure. The air-conditioning in this one was far better, and it

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was turned up high. The shock of the temperature change was another physical blow.

The three visitors had already been served hot tea, milkless and with cubes of white sugar on the glass saucers. They were seated, and they remained so when Geoff entered. It was far from the first meeting. But maybe it could be the last. He nodded and sat down across the low table from them.

"Well, Kerry." He addressed himself to the man on the left, speaking loudly over the sound of the air-conditioner and overhead fan. "I'm surprised to find you back. I thought we'd settled everything last time. We're only a week away from opening the sluices."

"A week and a half, now, and I'm working on that." Kerry Adams was thin and languid, with spiky features, untidy brown hair, and a self-confident manner. He held up a packet of papers. "I got a four-day stay, and the Ministry has changed its mind again. It's allowing my clients continued access to the site. You can't kick us out."

He sounded mildly pleased. The other two men, who had reason to be delighted, provided a study in contrasts. Tom Shelton was grinning in open triumph. Girard Saint, thirty years his senior, showed no emotion at all.

In fact, it seemed to Geoff that he had never seen Saint allow himself the luxury of human feelings. The old man, taller and thinner than Kerry Adams, was cool and elegant in a white shirt and pearl-grey suit. A long, crescent scar from his left temple to the corner of his mouth puckered the skin on that side, to provide a perpetual, sceptical smile. Together with his great height and his general impression of suave self-control, it suggested a man who stood superior to all mundane matters. Perhaps he did. For nearly half a century he had lived five thousand years in the past, and today he enjoyed a giant's reputation in the field of archeology.

And yet, if Geoff's information were correct, Girard Saint had more to gain—or lose—than anyone else if the dig were carried to completion. And if anything in Saint did admit emotion, that emotion was surely a suppressed resentment of Thomas Shelton.

Geoff hardly glanced at the papers that had been handed to him. In spite of Kerry Adams' casual manner he was too experienced and too competent to bring anything with loopholes. Since their last meeting he must have been up to Cairo, where he had cajoled, coerced, bribed, or browbeaten the relevant government officials into allowing the visiting American and the Frenchman to keep digging, even though it would interfere with the progress of the new irrigation project. And no matter who caused the delay, Barlow was likely to get the blame for it.

"Any new discoveries to justify this change?" Geoff addressed the question to all three men. Predictably, only Tom Shelton offered an answer.

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"You ought to know better than to ask." Shelton had as much muscle as Saint and Adams combined, plus the tan that came from shirtless days at the dig. To Geoff Barlow, cursed with a redhead's delicate skin that would redden, burn and peel but never darken, Shelton had the look of a Bondi lifeguard or an extra in a B-movie of girls and Florida beaches.

"Now, now, Geoff," added Kerry Adams. "You *know* you ought not to ask. It's none of our business, is it? Those papers are all that count, and they are in order."

"I'm sure they are. I won't argue with the Ministry. Any other business?"

"Not if you accept the papers. Dr. Shelton and Professor Saint wanted to be here, in case you refuse to accept the ruling."

"I do refuse to accept it—intellectually. But I don't have time to go to Cairo and fight it. So if that's all"—Geoff stood up again—"you'll have to excuse me. This is going to make a big difference to the flooding sequence. I have to send a telex to Farouk El Darwish, alerting him downriver, and I have to tell the crews."

He hardly looked at Tom Shelton and Girard Saint as he hurried out and around to the back of the trailer. The jeep stood with its doors and windows open under a high canopy of white canvas, but even with shielding the inside temperature was over a hundred. Geoff soaked a sponge from a gallon can of water and ran it over the front seat. It would evaporate in a minute or two, and cool the imitation leather in the process.

He was climbing into the driver's seat when Kerry Adams appeared.

"You heading for the airfield?"

"Have to. It's the nearest telex service."

"Mind if I hitch a ride, then? I have to fly back up to Helwan and fight the good fight on a contract with the cement works."

"Hop in."

Adams practiced a profession that Geoff hated, the international fixer, five and ten percent commission for introductions made, permits granted, and deals negotiated. And yet Geoff found it impossible to dislike him. For one thing, Adams had never tried to offer Geoff a bribe, even one disguised as a gift, though he admitted that it was a necessity in dealing with the Egyptian government. For another, he refused to act as a middleman on anything involving arms sales. "Which happens to be where the real money is," he had said, sipping Geoff's imported Scotch. "Look at fat old Khashoggi, he made hundreds of millions on the Saudi procurements. Mahvi did the same in Iran. Me, I'm going to die poor."

"But not very."

"Not by your standards. But poor by theirs. And mine. Everything's relative. You ought to get out of the engineering racket, Geoff. I'll find you a job. Remember why Willy Sutton said he robbed banks? 'It's where

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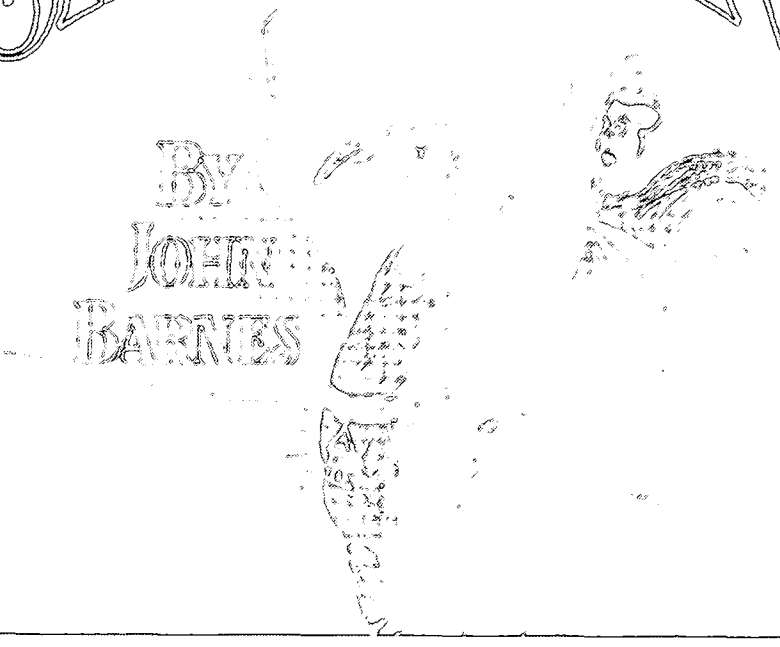
ISAAC ASIMOV

PRESENTS

SIN OF ORIGIN

BY JOEL BARNES



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--Janet Kagan

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the money is.' That's as true now as when he said it, but robbing banks is the hard way to get rich."

As Barlow forced the jeep into first forward gear—the transmission was balky, and due for an overhaul—he found it hard to disagree with Adams' philosophy. He had been working for a long time on agricultural engineering in Egypt, but sometimes he felt as though they were steadily losing ground. The pace of food production couldn't keep up with population increases. Yet didn't that make his own efforts more important, not less?

Neither man spoke until they had bumped out of camp and onto the dusty road that led to the airfield on the west bank. Then: "A word to the wise, Geoff," said Adams. "I was listening to the pair of them before you arrived. If they find anything, it may get messy. Don't get drawn into taking sides."

"Thanks. I drew that conclusion a long time ago. Shelton's so cocksure of himself. The Professor never lets you know what he's thinking, but he must hate that. It's hard to believe anyone would get so worked up about a hole in the dirt."

"Dirt to you and me. The war zone for them. Shelton's the contender, and he's looking to that hole to make his reputation and put Saint in his place at the same time. Don't assume that nothing's at stake. I've seen fifteen years of cut-your-throat-and-bury-you business deals, and I've never known anyone get as excited over money as professors do over rival theories."

They were on the outskirts of the airfield, driving along past a line of parked planes. It always reminded Geoff of a museum. Africa does not let aircraft die readily, and not all the ancient artifacts near Aswan were below ground. Strange, half-forgotten shapes would come droning up from the continental interior, stopping at Aswan for refueling or because they showed signs of falling apart in midair. He had seen Douglas DC-3's, Lockheed Constellations, an old twin-engined Beech 18, even a modified Avro transport of old and uncertain pedigree. Someday he expected the heavens to offer up the ghostly outline of a Dragon Rapide, or a De Havilland Comet.

Today's curiosity was a Vickers-Armstrong Viscount V630 with strange black and gold insignia.

"Mauritanian," said Adams. "Long way from home."

They parked the jeep and prepared to go their separate ways, Geoff Barlow to the communications center and Adams to the Arrival and Departures building. But as they were shaking hands, four barefoot Egyptians in grey cloth shirts and heavy pants came bustling out of the terminal. They were carrying between them a trunk of a size and weight unusual in air travel. Hurrying along behind them came a blonde-haired

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woman, bare-armed and bare-legged in a light dress of pale blue cotton. She was talking to them in English, and they were taking no notice.

She scurried round to stand in front of them. "Not so fast, damn it!" And then, when the men in front made a move to go around her, she turned to Kerry Adams. "Can you help me? I can't get them to do one thing I ask."

Adams waved his hand at Geoff. "There's your man, my dear. Speaks Arabic like a native, and if anything can get done round here, he knows how to do it. So long, now."

He went strolling off towards the Departures area, while the woman turned in appeal to Geoff. "I expected to be met off the plane but he didn't show up. And those people grabbed my luggage, and just walked away with it! They were going to steal it."

"No. They were taking you to a taxi run by one of their friends who speaks English. Where do you want to go?"

"El Shallah."

"He'd take you there—for ten times the going rate. Just wait right here for a moment." Geoff advanced on the four men, who had set the trunk down on its end on the dusty grey earth and were leaning forward on it. He spoke to them in Arabic, reflecting as he did so that Kerry Adams knew the language at least as well as he did. Their leader nodded sullenly, and the trunk was lifted and hoisted over the rear board of the jeep.

"Should I pay them?"

Barlow shook his head as he distributed coins pulled from his shirt pocket. "You don't want to encourage them. I'm giving them less than the standard porters' tip. Climb in, and I'll take you to El Shallah." He went around to the driver's side. "But I can't think where you'll be staying."

"I won't. I'll be picked up from there." Now that she was no longer agitated, her voice was full-throated and soft, with an accent that was difficult to place. She held out her hand as he climbed into the driver's seat. "My name is Marie, by the way. I owe you a big thank you."

Geoff Barlow shook her hand for an awkward split-second and gave her a curious glance as he turned on the ignition. She was a few years younger than he, maybe thirty-five, and she possessed a pale, almost anemic beauty that was totally out of place in the middle of Egypt. The impression of pallor came not from the complexion, which was touched with rouge on her prominent, concave cheekbones, but from the eyes. They were a slatey blue, surrounded by eyelashes and eyebrows so fair that they were easily seen only in strong sunlight. A network of fine crow's-feet was beginning to develop at the outer corners. Her mouth was broad, with marked laugh lines and a well-defined cupid's bow, and

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a face of classical English beauty was marred only by a rather long jawline.

Geoff put the car in gear, glancing at her face again and then down past the stickshift to her calves, ankles, and feet. He revised his earlier estimate of her age. She was close to forty, but even more attractive at second inspection. "Where in El Shallah?" he said. "And who's picking you up?"

Even before she answered, he had made his own guess. Tom Shelton had produced a succession of girlfriends at the dig. Most of them were in their early twenties, but from Shelton's comments about mature women, that reflected the availability of single women rather than his preference.

"Professor Saint." And then while Geoff was still getting over his surprise. "My . . . father."

There was a curious hesitation and awkwardness in her final word. Geoff did the arithmetic. According to the Press handouts that had been generated in Cairo before the dig began, Girard Saint was sixty-one years old. If his daughter were forty, she had been born when he was quite young. Apparently he had not always been the dry and pedantic professor.

"You speak English wonderfully well."

It was her turn to stare at him. "I should hope so. I was born and raised in Philadelphia. So do you. You're from England, aren't you?"

She was smiling and her tone of voice was friendly, but Geoff felt no less of an idiot. "I'm sorry," he said. "Your name being Marie, and Professor Saint being so . . . well . . ."

"So *French*? He is, isn't he? But I'm an actress, and most of my work has been in English. So I use Mary rather than Marie, with my mother's last name. I'm Mary Lambeth. And you—" She stared at him with seeming approval, while Geoff kept his eyes on the road. "—you don't look anything like I expected, but could you be the infamous Thomas Shelton?"

Geoff realized that he had failed to introduce himself. "No. I'm Geoff Barlow."

"And do you work on the excavation?"

"No." It seemed like a good time for honesty, before Mary/Marie was given the information by someone else. "I don't work on it, and your father would say I work against it. I work on the new irrigation project. When the sluices open, the dig will be under water."

"But the excavation isn't complete—it won't be for months!"

"It was supposed to be all done long ago. Dr. Shelton and your father—" he stole another quick look at her, seeking some family resemblance; there was none "—they assured the Ministry that everything would be finished by the late spring. You know what they're looking for, don't you?"

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"I know what Girard is looking for. A temple of Mersegret—the serpent goddess. But he and Dr. Shelton—I'm dying to meet him—have apparently been having a big argument about Ninth Dynasty sites in upper Egypt, and Shelton says that what they'll find will be a temple of Bubastis, not Mersegret. They agree that the place has to be here, and that's about all they do agree on."

"They have a long way to go before they settle their argument. So far, they've found nothing, nothing at all. Look." Geoff felt a need to explain his own position. "I'm not unsympathetic to what they are doing. We have to make sure we don't ignore old Egypt when we build new Egypt. And if your father and Shelton had *anything* to show—even one shard of a votive bowl, or the faintest hint of the outline of an old mastaba—I'd help them make their case in Cairo. But when they have nothing, I have to get on with the irrigation project. The seeds ought to be coming in later in the year, and chemical fertilizer has been ordered. There are two million more mouths to feed than there were when I first came to this country. We have to start growing more food here, and soon."

She reached across to pat his shoulder. "Hey, Geoff Barlow, you don't need to justify yourself to me. You're doing your job, I understand that. Tombs and burial urns and goddesses with cat heads or cow heads aren't my line, either, you know, and one touch from a sun like this shrivels up my skin as bad as it does yours. Open the floodgates anytime, I say, and let's *all* get out of here."

She touched Geoff's shoulder again and he felt a tingle through his whole body. But those were not exactly the words of a supportive daughter, or of a devotee of archeology. He wondered why on earth she had come. The jeep was approaching the huddle of huts and temporary trailers that made up El Shallah, and not another motor vehicle was to be seen.

Geoff reluctantly brought them to a halt on the outskirts of the village. He wanted to go on talking. "Whereabouts in El Shallah? I don't see any sign of the professor."

She shook her head. "He sent me a telegram, saying El Shallah. I sent one back, saying fine, but if I could get a flight I'd leave Athens a day early. Think he didn't get it?"

"There's an easy way to find out." Geoff put the car in gear again. "We can head straight out to the camp and ask Professor Saint. You can't stay here, anyway. The camp isn't great, but it's a sight better than anything in El Shallah."

As he did a right-angle turn to head east, Geoff was struck by a most disturbing thought. He had gone to the airfield for one reason only: to send a telex to Farouk El Darwish, saying that the project had been delayed half a week by orders of the Ministry. But he had not sent that

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telex. Worse than that, since first setting eyes on Mary Lambeth/Marie Saint, no thought of telexes had ever entered his head.

In the week preceding Mary Lambeth's arrival, the atmosphere at the excavation had been changing. Geoff, dropping by every day or two, had seen the first measured, almost leisurely approach to the dig give way to nervous, urgent pressure. The classical model for Egyptian archeological work had been established by Rhind and Flinders Petrie, a century earlier. Digging was to be slow and painstaking. Every find, no matter how apparently insignificant, must be accurately recorded. The ultimate sin and final irony would be the accidental destruction, through impatience for discovery, of an artifact that had survived intact for five thousand years, and whose continued existence was the prime reason for excavation. If the past horizon stretched so far away, went the argument, the future horizon was no less long. Take your time; be careful; be systematic.

But now the future had crowded down to a handful of days. In less than two weeks, the dry wadi where the excavation was proceeding would be drowned by the diverted waters of the Nile.

The dig itself was in the south side of the valley, above the area of short-lived flash floods. The camp had been established on the northern lip, and consisted of two caravan trailers and three substantial tents, arranged in a triangle. Thomas Shelton occupied one trailer and Girard Saint the other, where they kept the most valuable equipment under lock and key. The twenty Egyptian laborers slept in two of the tents, though a few of them preferred to walk at night back to El Shallah. At four o'clock, when Geoff Barlow and Mary Lambeth arrived at the camp, work had just begun again after a midday break. The period of the *khamsin*, the hot, dust-laden, southerly wind, had ended, and generous overtime pay now made possible a six-day work week.

Shelton had been down at the dig. When he heard the sound of the jeep's motor he headed straight up the slope of the valley. Some form of bravado or of masochism led him to work bare-chested in the most severe heat, and he had changed the shirt and leisure slacks of his meeting with Geoff for a sleeveless white singlet, white work pants, and a green Tyrolean hat with a rear veil to keep the sun off his head and neck. Sweat was trickling down his face and making tracks through the yellow-grey layer of dust that covered him from head to foot.

He stared at Mary Lambeth with obvious interest. "Hi. Who are you with? If you want action shots you'll have to be quick, we stop for the day in less than an hour."

"You have it wrong," said Geoff quietly. "She's not Press. This is Marie

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Saint. The professor's daughter. Marie—or Mary, if you prefer that—this is Thomas Shelton."

Shelton's face showed his feelings as well as Girard Saint's hid them. "Hey, I never knew he had a daughter!" He reached out his hand to take hers. "Where has he been keeping you all these years?"

"I just flew in from Athens. But I'm a day early, and I think Girard didn't receive my telegram. Where is he? We thought he would be here."

"He will be, anytime. He drove up to Kom Ombo and Idfu this morning, north of here. Thanks to *him*"—he jerked his thumb at Geoff—"we have to try and get more trained workers on board for the next week. And it's the worst time of the year for it."

"He didn't tell you I was coming?"

"He did not." Shelton laughed, and pushed his hat back on his head, to reveal curly sun-bleached hair. "Don't be surprised. Your father doesn't take me into his confidence, we fight too much over the same territory. I'd say we agree on only two things: there's something unique and important in this valley, and drowning it—which is what this son of a bitch is going to do in about ten days unless we can stop him—will be a major sin."

Mary Lambeth gave Geoff a sympathetic look from the corner of her eye. "Doctor Shelton—"

"—call me Tom."

"—Tom, I don't think you should blame Mr. Barlow. It's his job. And it sounds like an important job."

"Whose side are you on? Hell, I don't blame him. We can stand each other." Shelton grinned at both of them. "Geoff's all right—for an agricultural engineer."

"He tells me I'm a soulless technocrat," said Geoff, "with no sense of art and history. And I tell him he's a soulless historian, who doesn't mind how much people have to suffer and starve *today*, so long as he can study how people suffered and starved four thousand years ago."

"And we're both right." Shelton pulled his hat down over his forehead. "Where will you be staying?"

"I haven't got that far yet. Here, I suppose."

"The trailers are big enough for two." (And if you don't like sharing with the professor, said Shelton's admiring look, you'd be welcome in with me.) "Got much luggage?"

"One trunk."

"But it's the size of Khufu's pyramid." Geoff pointed at the back of the jeep. "How long will you be staying?"

"I don't know. Girard wants me to do some work while I'm here, and a lot of the material in my trunk is costumes."

"Work?" said Shelton.

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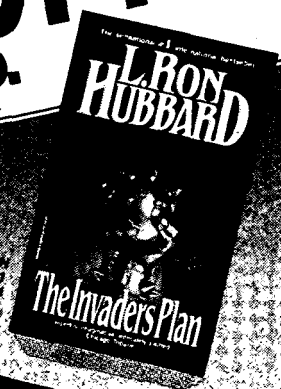

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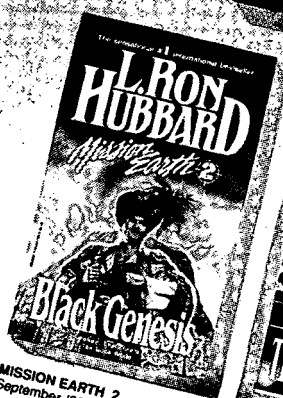

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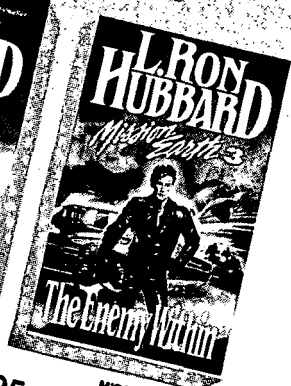

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"I'm an actress. We're going to make some tapes here with me in Egyptian dress." She hesitated. "Me dressed as Mersegret—you know, the serpent goddess."

"I know what your father thinks, but it's a big mistake." Shelton took her by the arm. "Come on, Mary Saint, let's get your trunk into the trailer. Then I'll give you the ten-cent tour of the dig, tell you what we're doing, and persuade you that Mersegret is the wrong choice. You need to do your costume bit as a lioness or a cat—for Bubastis. That's the temple we'll find here."

He led her towards the trailer. He had taken over. As Geoff followed a couple of steps behind, it occurred to him that no matter how good Shelton might be as an archeologist, he would have trouble being accepted as a public spokesman for the profession. He was too loud, too extrovert, too far from the usual perception of how an archeologist looked, sounded, and acted. But Girard Saint was perfect. And when it came to the perennial problem of fund-raising, Saint also understood the value of publicity. Mary the beautiful actress-daughter was just what a successful archeologist needed; not to mention a struggling agricultural engineer.

Girard Saint had not returned when Geoff left, and the next four days were too hectic for another visit to the excavation. A decision to postpone flooding in this one valley affected water levels everywhere to the north. There would be repercussions in Luxor, in Asyut, in El Minya, in Helwan, in Cairo, at the Nile Barrage, and even in the Damietta and Rosetta branches where they met the distant Mediterranean. Fresh water was everyone's lifeline. Complaints poured in by telex; naturally, they were all addressed to Geoff Barlow.

On the late afternoon of the fourth day, Tom Shelton sent a laborer with a hand-written scribbled message to Geoff's trailer near the main sluice control room: *After-dinner drinks tonight, eight o'clock, at excavation. Come one, come all. Prepare to have the Barlow opticals popped.*

It didn't suggest there had been a discovery—Shelton would have surely been more explicit and triumphant if they had found anything worthwhile. But drawn by curiosity rather than excitement, Geoff ate a plate of hot lamb curry and drove the jeep through the dusk, northeast to the dig. By the time he arrived at the camp it was already dark. For some reason, the lights in the trailer and tents had not been switched on.

He parked the jeep and turned off his engine. The night was completely silent. The usual cooking fires were unlit in the laborers' part of the camp, and no murmur of conversation came from the tents. A crescent moon gave enough light to stroll across to the trailers and knock on each

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door in turn. When there was no reply Geoff began to suspect a hoax; except that the message had explicitly said *excavation*, rather than camp. He walked to the valley's northern side, peering ahead into the complicated network of trenches and revetments that marked the progress of the dig. Only one light showed there, a green glow that seemed too faint for any sort of party. Geoff slithered carefully down the gritty face of soft rock to the valley floor.

The light of the moon did not strike here, and the only reference point was that green glimmer. He set out toward it, but it seemed to move as he did, always the same distance away. The heat of the day still clung to the rocks, and the lifeless air above them shimmered with a curious underwater effect. It was easy to imagine the floodgates already open, the quiet valley drowned. This land may have been parched desert for as long as *homo sapiens* had walked upright; but in one more week its thirst would end. The dry rocks would drink deep, then lie cool and still under five meters of fresh water.

Geoff stared around him, suddenly aware that in his musing he had lost all sense of direction. The excavation included roofed caves and tunnels burrowed deep into the valley walls. He was now in a long, straight cutting that ran shoulder-deep across the valley floor. At the other end of that trench, motionless, he saw a barely-visible figure. And as he watched it came towards him, with a lithe, sinuous movement that was graceful and oddly familiar.

He drew in a long, shivering breath through his nostrils. The figure resembled a slim-figured woman, but the outline of the head was not right. It was too long and pointed, and the eyes glowed a golden-green in the darkness.

"Mary?" he said hesitantly. And then, feeling foolish, "Mary Lambeth? That is you, isn't it?"

The darkness hung over him for a second, while the woman shape drifted closer. The mouth gaped open, to reveal a forked, flickering tongue. Geoff froze, unable to move.

"Told you so," said Tom Shelton's loud voice. Electric lights came on, blindingly bright. "All right, Geoff, confess it. Didn't you have the feeling you were in the presence of something supernatural?"

"What the hell's going on here?" Now that his eyes were becoming used to the light, Geoff could see from her body that the woman in front of him was indeed Mary Lambeth. She was wearing a skin-tight body stocking, painted with green and brown diamond patches, and on her head was a close-fitting mask and headdress styled to resemble a snake. She wore a serpent aegis on her right shoulder.

"My idea," said Shelton. From the tone of his voice, he had begun his after-dinner drinking early and hard. "Saint is getting ready to take

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some footage of Mary, and she wanted to know how effective her outfit would be. I told her you'd be the ultimate test. Well? Did you feel something supernatural when you first saw her?"

Mary had not spoken, but now she came forward again and Geoff realized that the movement, far more than the costume, seemed serpentine. She had mastered the slithering, leisurely motion of a snake whose prey was already hypnotized and helpless.

"Where is Girard Saint?" he said. He had felt the touch of something inhuman, but he was not ready to admit it.

"He drove up to Syene—Aswan, if you'd rather have its modern name. He'll be at the camp in a few minutes. Come on, let's go up there." Shelton moved to Mary Lambeth's side, and took her arm. She jerked herself free, and at once came to stand next to Geoff and linked her arm in his.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "That was dumb, wasn't it? But it seemed like a fun thing to do this afternoon when I finished the costume."

"That's all right. It's one hell of a costume, and you've got the movement perfectly." She was still clinging to his arm, and Geoff liked the feeling. But finally he felt obliged to move, and led the way up the valley side to the camp. As they breasted the lip of the incline and headed for the trailers, Girard Saint drove up in a land rover.

"The lights," he said at once as he climbed out. He gave Geoff and Mary a cold stare. "Why no lights?"

"We've been down at the excavation." Shelton led the way into one of the trailers, and used the interior electric lights long enough to ignite and position a gasoline lantern. "Mary wanted to see how her costume fitted in with everything else. And we tried it out on Barlow, to see how effective it is."

"Foolishness." Saint grunted his disapproval. "Mary, you and I need to have a word or two." She released Geoff's arm, but the older man was still staring at them. Geoff sensed a tension he could not explain, until finally Saint accepted a glass of chilled wine from Shelton, sat down on a camp stool by the lantern, and continued, "But a fine costume, that I admit. Monsieur Barlow, you may be receiving a wrong impression of my profession. Funds are always short, and there is a need for publicity and exotic shows. But the heart of archeology is—as always—slow, hard work. Days and weeks of labor, far from the public's eye."

If that sounded rather stilted as an apology for what had just happened, it was more than Shelton had offered. And from Girard Saint, it corresponded to an outpouring of emotion. Geoff accepted a bottle of beer and sat down on a stool opposite. Mary removed the snake mask and headdress and moved to sit next to her father. She put her arm tentatively around him. Shelton, standing above the line of the lantern so that his face was illuminated only from below, snorted his disagreement.

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"There's hard work, sure," he said. "Hard work's necessary to be a good archeologist, but it's not *sufficient.* Work is just the follow-up, the labor you need to prove what you already know is true. Admit it, Girard, when you made that big find of Mersegret relics at Kalabsha you were convinced they were there before you put a shovel in the ground. You *feel* it, or smell it. And then you set out to find it and prove it."

He sounded very drunk, but to Geoff's surprise Saint was nodding grudging agreement. "He is right, Monsieur Barlow." The crescent scar on Saint's thin face was vivid in the lamplight as he stirred on his camp stool and peered out at the surrounding darkness. "The best archeologists, they have a power that cannot easy be defined. They sense emanation, from the land itself. The very aura of antiquity. When you feel that, the hair on the back of your neck rise up, and your soul she says, *Here*! If Dr. Shelton and I share one thing in the world, it is that sixth sense. And if we agree on one thing, it is that the sixth sense tells us this valley is *enceinte*—pregnant with promise of discovery. Bubastis or Mersegret, only careful exploration can tell us that, but great discovery."

Everyone turned, to stare toward the dark valley. After a few silent seconds, Saint added softly: "And there is one other thing to remember, Monsieur Barlow. The *feeling* may come early, but the proof may take months or years. The excavation at Kalabsha, that one needed three years before the Mersegret relics were discovered. Today, Kalabsha is part of Lake Nasser, deep underwater. No matter what other treasures lay there, they have gone forever. Think, Monsieur Barlow. What does that tell you about today's civilizations?"

There was sudden passion in his words. Geoff Barlow realized that he had misjudged the man. Girard Saint's feelings were well-hidden, but they were strong. And looking now at his glittering eyes, as they stared at Tom Shelton and then flicked across to Mary and to Geoff himself, he read emotions that went far beyond archeology.

A billion gallons of water weigh four million tons. The plans to define the course of that huge volume were so complex that they had become a juggernaut, taking on the mass of the water itself. The previous delay, coming only a week before the irrigation project was scheduled to begin, had caused horrible problems. And still the requests for special treatment came pouring in.

Geoff sweated over them, examined what would have to be done to make a change now—any change—and decided that the problem was beyond him and maybe beyond anyone. The project had reached its limit, and so had he. His head was reeling, his throat was dry, and his eyes were losing focus.

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He stepped across to the trailer's washbasin, took a disposable thermometer from its packet, and stuck it under his tongue.

A hundred and two. Just what he needed, when one of the busiest days of his life lay ahead of him. Sandfly fever, rift valley fever, malaria, whatever—it had to be caught at once.

He drove to the airfield and walked straight into Lou Marino's office.

"I need thirty-six hours. The sluice opens at midnight tomorrow. After that you can let me die."

"Let's hope not." Marino took Geoff's temperature as a formality, but a touch of the back of his hand to Geoff's forehead has told him all he needed. "You're like me, you've been here too long. Egypt's under your skin and you can't stop working. Your shots up to date?"

"I think so."

"Then hold on." Marino went across to the rack and selected three prefilled syringes and a phial of drugs. "You're going to feel a little bit off after this, maybe not see straight. But your head should function all right. Soon as the flooding's over and things are under control, collapse and go to bed. Take one of these pills every six hours. No—" Geoff was rolling up his sleeve "—you'd better have this lot in the butt. Ten c.c.'s of gamma glob. Make you a bit sore when you sit down."

"I owe you one, Lou."

"Damn right. If Harley Street knew what I was doing here I'd be struck off the register. You know what I like about this place? It's all emergencies. I don't have time to think or worry." He injected the last syringe. "That'll do. No booze, now, and easy on the caffeine. You'll feel worse before you feel better."

Marino waved away any suggestion of pay—"All comes out of what they borrow from us, and they're never going to pay it back anyway"—and walked Geoff out to the jeep. "Good luck tomorrow. Get that irrigation project up and running. I'm sick as you are of seeing malnutrition all the way from here to Luxor."

Geoff's eyes were still giving him trouble. He drove slowly back to the trailer and was just in time to catch a telephone call from Kerry Adams in Cairo. He picked up the phone with premonitions of disaster.

"Geoff?" The voice at the other end was puzzled. "My dear lad, just what is going on down there?"

"We're sweating the final schedules. For God's sake don't tell me that you've wangled another delay. I'm all set for midnight tomorrow. If there's a change I'll be dead meat. I just can't handle it."

"You can relax. There won't be any delay. In fact, that's why I'm calling. I was making progress towards a postponement of your project—an indefinitely long one—when I got a message late this afternoon from Girard Saint. Your old professor told me to stop trying, wrap it up,

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and send him my final invoice. My dear lad, what did you do to the old gent? Geoff? Are you still there?"

"I'm here." Geoff was staring at the handset in disbelief.

"Look, it's not the money, it's the *principle* of the thing. I'm dying of curiosity. Find out what's going on, would you, and let me know. I'll owe you eternal gratitude."

"I'll look into it, Kerry."

He was too muzzy-headed for more work on planning. Instead he went back to the jeep and headed for the excavation. He was just as puzzled as Kerry Adams. He had made three brief visits to the dig during the past week. Each time, the work had been frenzied but unproductive. There had been one minor stir of excitement, when the laborers came across an underground set of chambers dug deep into the hillside, but both Shelton and Saint had dismissed them as recent, no more than a thousand years old.

Everything was relative. In the United States, even in England, a thousand-year-old discovery would be major news. Here it was nothing. Shelton and Saint were looking back four times that far for their prizes.

On the way to the camp he paused by the dam in the head of the valley, three hundred meters from the excavation. The water level was still rising, inching up the wall that blocked the entrance to the long, narrow depression. Timing had to be precise. The Nile itself was cresting to summer flood. Either the sluicegates would be opened in thirty hours, or water would begin to brim over the top of them. At the moment the dam was perfectly tight, holding thirty feet of water with not even a trickle reaching the dry valley.

The area where he had received the gamma globulin shot was already tender, and he felt a need to move those sore muscles. He left the jeep and limped away from the dam, skirting the edge of the valley. The archeologists were nowhere to be seen. Were they still working? It would soon be dusk, but maybe they were making a last desperate effort to find something. He started towards the excavation, then paused on the slope of the valley. He had come to the dig from an unusual direction, and he was looking directly down into one of the cuttings. Standing on the sandy floor of that trench, two hundred feet below and hidden from every angle except this, were two people. At first he thought they were embracing. Then he realized they were struggling together, in total silence.

It was Tom Shelton and Mary Lambeth, body to body in the soft half-light of a warm Egyptian dusk. He held her by the arms and was pulling her closer to him.

"Come on, Mary." Shelton's voice was only an urgent whisper, but it carried easily to Geoff in the still night air. "You have to. You know you want to."

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"No. No, Tom." She turned her face away from him. Geoff could hear her panting breath. "Tom, let me go. You don't understand, I can't let you do it. I don't want to, and anyway everything is a lot more complicated than you realize. Tom, you're hurting. Please don't try to force me. Please."

Geoff was not prepared to stand by and witness a rape. He was about to start down the slope when Shelton grunted and released his hold. "You're a damned witch, Mary." His voice was shaking. "You don't know what you do to me. I need you."

"I'm sorry, Tom. I can't let you. I'm going back to camp now. Girard will wonder where I've got to." She took a pace backwards, then turned to walk up the cutting. Shelton did not follow her. He knelt down, and lit a gasoline lantern.

After what Geoff had seen it would be too embarrassing to reveal his presence. As quietly as he could he moved to the left, hiding in the shadows until Mary herself was out of sight. Then he again peered down into the long line of the trench.

Tom Shelton had not moved. He was still crouched on his knees, but his expression in the lamplight was no longer passionate or imploring. It was murderous.

Geoff watched until the other man picked up the lantern and headed for the opposite valley slope. Then he too turned, and walked slowly back to the jeep.

The drugs that Marino had given him knocked Geoff out cold for eleven hours. He slept until eight-thirty, then came instantly awake with the knowledge that today was *it*. Valves must be opened and closed in precise sequence, all the way from the Aswan High Dam to Asyut. The Nile was a controlled river now, from Lake Nasser to the Mediterranean, and no reach could be changed without affecting every other.

He glanced out of the trailer window at the sky, then at the wall thermometer. Already it was nearly ninety, and the forecast predicted near-record temperatures of a hundred and twenty. He drank four glasses of orange juice (the inside of his mouth was furred and unfamiliar, like an alien, felt-lined cave) before he stepped outside the trailer. A big monitor lizard, five feet long, lay sunning itself no more than ten paces from the door. It did not stir at his appearance. He shielded his eyes from the sun and stared east, at the Nile itself. The river was half a kilometer across at this point, sluggish and dark, with waterfowl forming clusters of grey specks on its unruffled surface. Irrigated fields stood on both sides. The grey-green mass of Philae Island was visible to the north, covered with acacia bushes.

The whole world was peaceful, drugged by heat, made lazy by the

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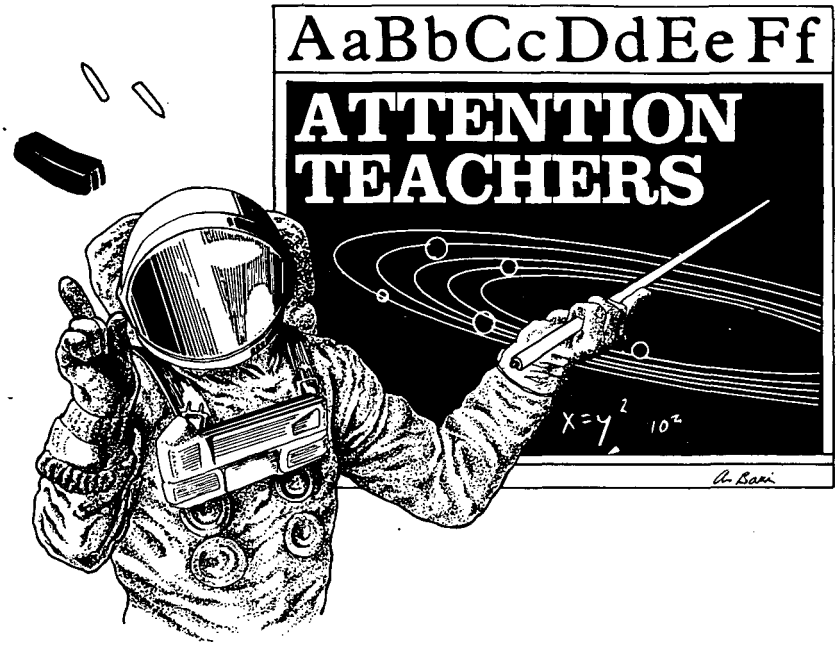

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presence of abundant fresh water, drowsing under the summer sun of southern Egypt. The river bank had been like this for ten thousand years, never changing, dreaming away the centuries, populated by the spirits of laborers and priests, of scribes and Pharoahs.

And then the gas-engine that powered the air-conditioners sprang to stuttering, intrusive life. A uniformed native on a motor scooter came chugging toward the trailer with a sack of messages.

Geoff sighed. It was beginning. He stepped forward and held out his hand to the messenger.

He was busy until sunset, working under an unrelenting pressure that came from a hundred worried hydrologists, factory operators, and agricultural advisors, each with a problem labeled as highest priority. Telegrams were delivered in bundles, visitors came and went, the telephone never stopped. The kebab delivered for Geoff's midday meal went uneaten. He did not feel sick, but he was lightheaded, he had no appetite, and his eyes were aching. He knew that the price for today would be paid tomorrow; with interest.

At seven o'clock, when dusk was already falling, he sent a messenger to make sure that work at the excavation was over and the site had been vacated. He also sent a message inviting Girard Saint, Tom Shelton, and Mary Lambeth to come to the control area to witness the opening of the sluicegates. It might seem to be twisting the knife in their wounds, but the sight of the rushing waters was one that few visitors would resist.

And apparently the archeologists were ready to go gracefully. For the first time in twenty-four hours, Geoff thought of the call from Kerry Adams, and of Girard Saint's decision to accept the flooding of the valley without seeking another time extension.

That still made no sense. If Saint had found nothing, another delay was desirable; and if by chance he *had* found something, some discovery that he did not want to talk about, then delay was absolutely essential.

The messenger returned to confirm that the excavation had been abandoned. Tents were packed away, the trailers were ready to be moved. But he had been unable to deliver Barlow's other message, because neither the foreign woman nor the two men were anywhere to be seen. He had knocked on the locked trailer doors without result.

Geoff dismissed him and turned to other matters. The trailers did not need to move yet. They were in the camp, far above the flood waters that would surge along the valley floor.

At nine o'clock, the torrent of incoming messages suddenly ceased. It was too late to ask for changes, and everyone downriver knew it. The operation was now running on automatic. Unless Geoff himself threw an emergency switch, the floodgates in the valley would open exactly at midnight.

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Girard Saint arrived just before eleven o'clock. He was alone, and he seemed angry. He accepted the offer of a glass of wine and sat in the air-conditioned trailer, staring out at the desert night.

"Marie is a fool," he said suddenly, and drained his glass of wine. Geoff stared at him in astonishment.

"I warned her," Saint went on. "Shelton may be a competent archeologist, but he is certainly a—a *philanderer*. I told her. And does she listen to me, and believe me? No." There was anger and pain in his expression as he reached for the bottle and refilled his glass.

"What happened?"

"They are gone."

"Gone? Where?"

Saint sat up straight in his chair and waved at the dark beyond the trailer window. "Where? Who knows? When I come to the camp, she is vanished. Her clothes taken, her possessions gone. I go to Shelton, to ask if he can tell me anything. He has gone, too—and his trailer is empty."

"No message? Nothing?"

"Nothing." Saint's harsh profile and scarred face could have been modeled on an Egyptian frieze. He had emptied his glass, and was filling it for the third time.

Geoff's head was buzzing with fatigue and drugs. That Mary Lambeth and Tom Shelton would run off together, when last night she had so clearly rejected him . . . ridiculous. Could a mere twenty-four hours induce such a change of heart? Before Geoff would believe that, he would believe . . . other things.

He felt like telling Girard Saint what he had seen, what he had heard. But he had been an eavesdropper, even if an unintentional one. And how could he describe the blood-fury in Shelton's expression, when the archeologist had stared after Mary as she walked away along the cutting?

He looked at his watch. Ten after eleven. Fifty minutes more, and the switches would flip. The gears would begin to turn, the pent-up lake would move to engulf the valley. A trickle at first, but soon a Niagara, an unstoppable avalanche of water.

And anything in that valley would be gone forever from human sight.

Maybe it was the side-effects of the drugs he was taking, but Geoff felt a dull ache in his stomach and a feeling of tension in his forebrain. He could not forget Tom Shelton's face, the last time that he had seen it. Although no more than a minute had passed, he looked again at his wristwatch.

Eleven eleven. Forty-nine minutes.

He stood up without a word to Saint and left the trailer. It should take no more than ten or fifteen minutes to check, and then he would be able to banish at least one worry from his throbbing head.

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He drove fast, with the jeep's headlights full on; they were hardly needed. There was a half-moon, high in the sky, bright enough to show every small rock and pebble, and when he hurried down the slope into the valley the excavations there were an etched pattern of dark lines on silver. The trenches ran across the tilted floor of the ravine and continued deep into the side of it. If anything were to be found it would be in those dark tunnels, far from the cool moonlight.

But where? There were at least ten tunnels, with their own cross-cuts and connecting corridors.

He switched on the flashlight and hurried into the first opening. Within twenty feet the temperature had fallen forty degrees; he became aware of his clothes, sweat-stained and clammy against his body, and of his own fevered condition. In less than a minute he was shivering. He swept the flashlight beam from floor to ceiling and forced himself to move steadily forward. The dig had been evacuated, and the native laborers had picked it clean before they left. Not a scrap of cloth or metal remained. Tall heaps of loose, sandy rock cast moving shadows in the darkness, suggesting dark openings in the corridor that vanished as he came closer to them.

By the time that he had wound his way through to the fourth corridor, he was cursing his own stupidity. Fatigue and medication; they had made him think ridiculous thoughts. The image of Mary, raped and strangled and abandoned by Tom Shelton in some dark underground warren, that had sprung into his mind in the trailer. No logic could banish it. But the insanity of the idea was obvious. Mary had just been playing hard to get, until finally she had decided to give herself to Shelton and run off with him. That thought made his stomach churn.

He turned the flashlight to look at his wristwatch. Only eleven twenty. Amazingly, he had been here only a few minutes.

Beyond his wrist, a gleam of white showed in the bright half-cone cast by the flashlight.

A fat spider. Crouched on the rock, ten paces ahead, projecting from an overhang of rock where laborers had cut only to waist height.

He moved closer. Not a spider. A hand, a human hand, clawing at the sandy floor. Mary, in some final spasm of agony, clutching the vanishing world. He shuddered and bent forward, sweat running into his eyes. The hand, the arm, then the whole body came into view, face down.

Not Mary. No need to turn it over. It was not Mary Lambeth.

It was Tom Shelton, still and lifeless, with a bloody hole in his skull above his right ear. The round-edged, gaping wound still oozed brain tissue.

Beyond Shelton's body, tucked farther into the cleft in the rock, were three small travel cases sitting next to a big trunk. Geoff crawled in

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until he could open the trunk and lift the lid. It was filled with clothing, make-up, a razor, aftershave, shoes, hand mirrors, pipes, jewelry, books, pills, toothpaste—a jumble of men's and women's personal possessions, stuffed in with no sign of organization.

Geoff crawled out, stood up, and leaned forward to rest his forehead against the rock of the overhang. If his earlier thoughts had been stupid, they had at least been logical. Now there was no logic at all. But it was clear what he had to do.

He reached in under the rocky overhang and seized Shelton's feet, but he could not pull the body free while he held the flashlight. He stuck that in his pocket and began to move backwards along the tunnel, dragging the corpse by the ankles. The hard part was still to come. Once he was out of the excavation he would have to drag Shelton up the valley wall, above high-water mark for the coming flood.

Not even a glimmer of moonlight penetrated here, and the tunnel was totally dark. Every pace or two he touched his elbow to the rocky wall, to steer himself in the right direction. After twenty steps he reached a branch point in the corridor. Already he was exhausted.

He halted and turned his head. Left. That was the way he had come. But from the right, he thought he saw a faint glow of light.

Was it a shortcut to the open air?

While he was still hesitating, the light moved. It was a long, wavering outline, a pattern of diamond patches that condensed as he watched to a human silhouette.

"Mary?" His throat produced only a hollow croak, hardly speech. "Mary?"

He moved, and the shape disappeared. It had to be a trick of the moonlight, a refraction of moonbeams from oddly-cut surfaces of rock. But it should be the quickest way out.

He began to drag Shelton's body in that direction, hearing the pulse of blood in his ears and his own painful breathing. He was close to collapse. He knew he should look at his watch, but he also knew that it would make no difference what time it was. Until Shelton's body was above the high-water mark he would not abandon it. They would end this together, in the flood or out of it.

At the next cross-cutting in the tunnel the shape was there again, faintly visible in one of the branches, fading as he stared at it to become no more than a flickering pattern of light and dark.

"Mary?" He called her name huskily, and fancied he heard the whisper of his own name in reply, echoing along the corridor. He no longer believed that he had found a shortcut to the outside—far from it—but now he was committed to following the wandering light. It must lead to the open air.

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And it did. Finally he emerged into the valley, much higher than where he had come in and forty yards from his entry point to the excavation. He stared towards the line of the dam, invisible from here, and tried to gauge his own height relative to the flood line. He was already safe, or close to it.

Finally he permitted himself to look at his watch. Eleven fifty-nine. He had made it with one whole minute to spare.

He made a final effort, picked up Shelton's body, and carried it twenty feet farther up the hillside. Then he turned to sit on the warm rock, resting his head on his shaking hands and staring up and down the length of the valley. The moonlight was brighter than ever, and all was peaceful. But in moments that would end. Even as he waited, the floodgates were opening, one by one. A billion gallons were poised for their swoop along the valley. He heard a faint sigh, the distant sound of waking waters.

At the same moment his eye caught a flicker of movement below him. Girard Saint was down at the excavation, crouching by the tunnel through which Geoff had entered. The archeologist was standing with a pickaxe resting on his shoulder. He too heard the far-off sound of the opening sluice, and straightened to look in that direction.

But he would see nothing, although from Geoff's vantage point a wall of water was already visible, sweeping down the valley.

"Look out!" Geoff cried. "Get higher!"

His voice was no louder now than it had been when he called for Mary in the warren of tunnels. Instead of helping Saint, it distracted him. The waiting man turned away from the head of the valley and stared puzzled up at Geoff. By the time he heard the water and began to move, it was too late.

The first crest was less than four feet high. It seemed smoothly harmless, a ripple in a child's bathtub. As Saint screamed and ran it lifted him effortlessly, spun him end-over-end, and laid him gently on the valley floor. He scrambled back to his feet and headed up the valley side. He had taken four steps when the second wave hit, twelve feet high. His body disappeared without a sound into a black swirl of water that became rapidly more turbulent.

The main crest was on its way, a hissing cliff of darkness. Geoff began to scramble higher up the slope, suddenly unsure of his own safety. The wave passed safely below him, but as it encountered the main curve of the valley it rode higher yet, to smash into the steepest part of the slope. Although no excavation had been made there, the valley wall crumbled under the impact. Geoff saw slabs of rock lifted like wafers and carried off by the flood. When the waters receded, they exposed a series of dark chambers behind the slope face.

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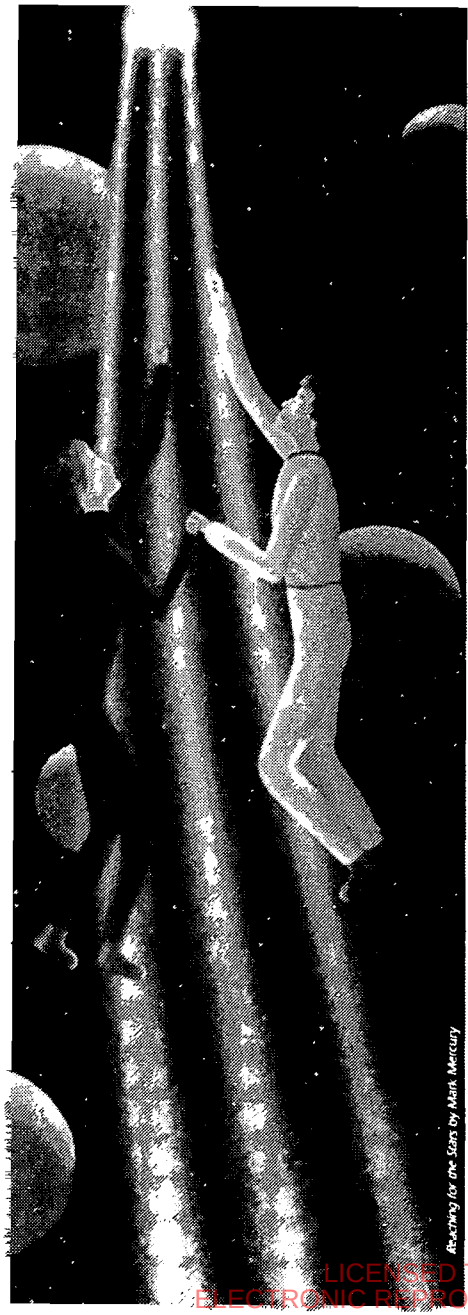

FOR THOSE WHO STILL DARE TO DREAM

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He looked along the whole length of the valley. The first transient of the flood was over, and the water was settling to a steadier flow. In two more kilometers it would leave the narrow defile and spread through the irrigation channels, first as a trickle, then as the smooth, orderly flow needed for the late summer planting.

The movement of the water was hypnotizing. Geoff watched it for a few minutes, too sick and exhausted to move. According to Lou Marino's medical advice, this was the point where he was supposed to go to bed and collapse. But there was one more thing he had to do, one thing he had to know, before he could permit himself that luxury.

He left Tom Shelton's body on the slope, safely above the water level, and began to shuffle uphill toward the trailers occupied by the archeologists. Those fifty feet of easy ascent were almost beyond his strength.

The door of Girard Saint's trailer was locked. Geoff swore, staggered across to his jeep, and found a tire iron. The metal door bent, then screeched open with the sound of a man in agony.

The trailers held two bunks, side by side. A pale shape lay on the left-hand one. Geoff lurched to it and shone his flashlight, scarcely daring to look.

It was Mary Lambeth. Mary dressed only in a bra and panties, Mary showing vivid bruises on her arms, legs, and body; tightly bound and gagged and tied to the corners of the bunk. But Mary alive and conscious.

Her eyes followed him as he went across to the kitchen drawer, took out a serrated knife, and sawed through her gag and bonds.

She groaned as she lifted her hands. The rope marks had cut deep into her wrists. "Geoff," she said. "Tom Shelton?"

Geoff tried to shake his head and smile reassuringly at the same time. "Dead. Killed."

Her face became terrified. "Girard Saint, if he comes . . ."

"No. Won't come. Dead." He tried to smile again, reached out his hands to comfort her.

But at that point something went badly wrong inside his head. He was about to tell her what happened, and ask some questions of his own. Instead he lay down on the right-hand bunk, covered his face with his hands, and began to weep. Beside him, he could hear Mary Lambeth weeping, too. And after a while he could hear nothing.

"My dear lad, flooding the valley was supposed to get *rid* of archeologists. Instead, you inflict a whole plague of them on us."

Geoff Barlow's world sat on the borderland between dream and reality. Some of his visitors were solid and substantial. They stuck needles in him, or changed his sheets and his I/V. Others, like Tom Shelton and Girard Saint, came to sit grinning at his bedside for a while, dripping

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blood and water onto the floor of his room and ignoring his pleas for them to go away. Now and then a serpent-headed woman wandered in through the wall. She did not stay long. She circled his bed and said unintelligible things to Geoff, smiling at him with her open, forked-tongued mouth. On her final visit she leaned over him and caressed his forehead with a cool, exploring mouth, sucking fever out of him. Finally she touched his brow with her hand, nodded in satisfaction, and quietly went about her business.

This new visitor seemed real enough. Geoff was not sure. Kerry Adams was carrying his briefcase, which seemed right, but he was also carrying a big paper sheet of hieroglyphics with an English text below.

"This was on the first piece of carved stone that they found," he said. "It was washed out of one of the interior chambers by the initial wave. Corky Rosenberg flew in from Heliopolis and produced a first cut at translation. I thought you might like to see it. Girard Saint was quite right, you know; there was a temple to Mersegret in the valley."

Geoff said nothing. He could smile at people, but he could not speak to them. After a while the other man propped the sheet of paper upright on the dresser by the window and left the room. Geoff stared at the hieroglyphics and read the English words, over and over. Finally he closed his eyes.

When he opened them again it was night, and Mary Lambeth was there. He looked at her suspiciously. He was fairly sure that she was alive, but her eyes were closed.

He waited, but she did not open them. And if she did not speak, he would have to try.

"Mary."

It was more like a groan than a word, but it worked. She was looking at him now. Wide slatey-blue eyes; long, pale lashes and eyebrows. Worried look.

"Mary." He had to speak very slowly, and very carefully. "I am sorry about your father. He is dead. Drowned."

She gave a gasp of indrawn breath. "I know. They found his body, a mile from the dam. You saved me, Geoff."

"He killed Shelton." Geoff struggled to sit up. "He followed me. He would have killed me, so I couldn't tell what I found."

"I know, I know. Lie quiet." She reached out her hand to restrain him, and he saw the marks where the ropes had cut into her wrists, red and inflamed. "He was going to murder me, too, Geoff. He said he would be back later and kill me. You saved my life."

"His own daughter. He went mad, Mary."

"No."

"Not mad?"

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"He was mad. But I am not his daughter." The slatey-blue eyes fixed on his. "Couldn't you tell? I was his mistress. His kept woman. For two years. I was sure you guessed that, and I was very ashamed. He was strange, he insisted that when I came here I must describe myself as his daughter. It was asking for trouble."

Geoff's brain did not seem to be working right. He had to struggle to understand the simplest ideas. "You loved him?" he said at last.

She shook her head. "I don't think I ever loved him. But I was faithful to him. He was very jealous, of you, and of Tom Shelton. Doubly jealous of Shelton—Tom found me attractive, and they were bitter professional rivals. When Shelton made a pass at me, that was too much. But he hated you, too."

"Hated me? Why? I never harmed him."

The slatey eyes glanced away. "Because he could see that I liked you. And I sympathized with what you are doing here. That was intolerable to him. He saw a battle between old Egypt and new Egypt, and you and all the engineers were the enemy."

"But he was wrong. Old Egypt is on *my* side." Geoff pointed wearily to the paper on the dresser. "Read that, Mary."

The translation had been done in large, clearly-formed block letters: "TAKE THE WATERS OF HAPI, THE BELOVED RIVER THAT RA CREATED; USE THEM FULLY, SO THAT ALL THE LANDS MAY DRINK; BE THE BRINGER OF FOOD, HEAP WITH CORN THE GRANARIES, GIVE LIFE TO THE FLOCKS AND HERDS, CARE FOR THE POOR AND NEEDY. DO THESE THINGS, AND YOU BECOME BELOVED OF MERSEGRET. WHEN YOU ARE HERE THE WHOLE LAND REJOICES. YOU WILL BE GUARDED AND PROTECTED.

While she was reading, Geoff closed his eyes and drifted far away, to a land of rain and gentle sunshine and cool green woods and fields. He yearned for it. When he awoke Mary was holding his hand in hers, and Kerry Adams was standing by the bedside. They were staring in silence at the paper.

"I'm here, Geoff," said Mary. She had noticed that his eyes were open. "I read it. But what does it mean?"

"I'm not sure." He was feeling stronger, and he sat up. "But I like to think it's a vote of confidence. The work I'm doing here isn't wrong. We have to respect the past, of course we do; but we can't become obsessed by it. We have a ton of work to do. We have to build new Egypt on old Egypt."

She was nodding. "Maxim Gorky."

"What about him?"

"He said in one of his plays, *The Lower Depths*: 'In the carriages of the past, you can't go anywhere.' That's what you're saying."

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"I am. But I'm not sure where we're going, either, in our carriages. Maybe round in circles. Whatever we do here, everything is temporary. Nothing—not even the Aswan High Dam itself—will last as long as the Pyramids and the Sphinx."

"So you're ready to wise up, Geoff?" said Kerry Adams. "You have to get out of here. Let me find you a decent job that won't wear you flat pushing the same stone uphill every day; raise a family; live the good life."

"Sounds great." Geoff spoke to Adams, but his eyes were fixed on Mary's. "Someday, I'll do it. I promise I will. But not quite yet. Let me wear just a little bit flatter first; then I'm all yours."

She squeezed his hand. He understood. *Someday. Not yet, but someday soon.*

There was a creaking of the open window. Geoff glanced across at it. The sound was probably just the metal frame, cooling in the evening breeze. But perhaps it was also the gods and goddesses of old Egypt, Ra and Horus and Bubastis and Anubis and Mersegret, with all their brothers and sisters, crouching outside, nodding their approval; while far beyond them, in the warm night, Hapi, the Nile River, the Father of Waters, the Heartbeat of Civilization, silently spread its benediction across the new farmlands. ●

THE WOMAN WALKING BEHIND EINSTEIN
EINSTEIN CALENDAR 1987

same photograph
looking at the same camera
relativity
makes her
unknown

—Roger Dutcher

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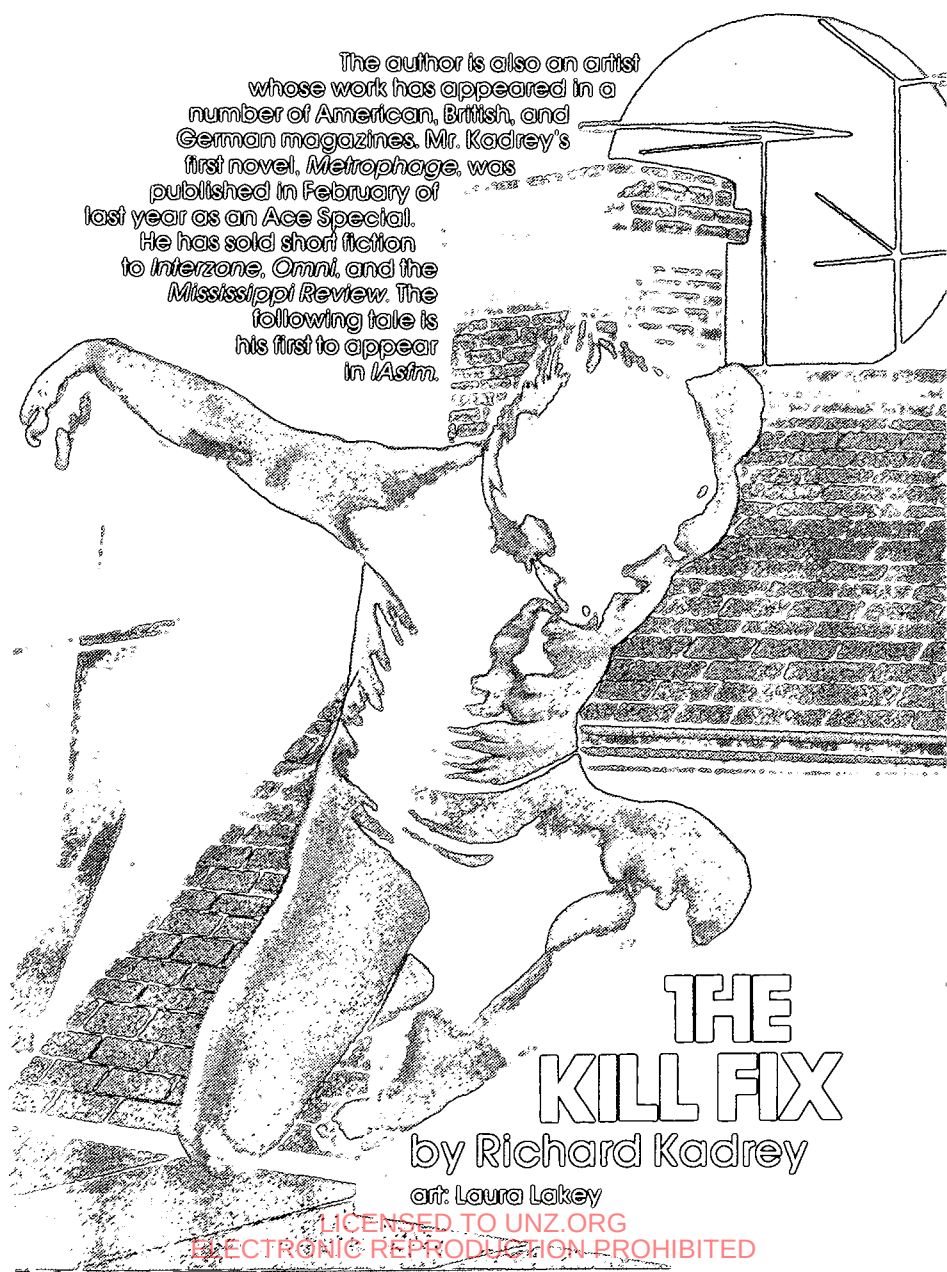
The author is also an artist whose work has appeared in a number of American, British, and German magazines. Mr. Kadrey's first novel, *Metrophage*, was published in February of last year as an Ace Special. He has sold short fiction to *Interzone*, *Omni*, and the *Mississippi Review*. The following tale is his first to appear in *IAsfm*.



THE KILL FIX

by Richard Kadrey

art: Laura Lakey

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I go for the woman, but her companion sees me and reaches for something under his coat. Inhuman reflexes. But I eat inhuman for lunch. The woman's heartbeat whispers to me, tells me secrets. The man's mouth moves, talking some animal language of pain. The snapping of his bones sounds like the break-up of an ice-floe, a lonely, faraway sound. I leave him twitching with the Magnum still in his hand. Then the woman and I are one, dancing on a carpet of shattered glass in the alley behind the club, locked in a slow motion waltz, my teeth in her throat, her blood filling my belly. Jewels, I think. Honey. Sweat. Love. My heartbeat slows as the thing in my head feels her life going. As it goes, she makes a low, unsurprised sound as if she has been expecting me or somebody like me for some time. She finds death a release, and she's right. Her death has released me from my thirst and the thing in my head purrs like a fat, contented cat. I leave her body in an overflowing dumpster. Then, burning with her life, I vault a low wall and climb, my heels slapping, rolling across the rooftops. Maybe you've seen me among the TV antennae and satellite dishes—the slaughterhouse Baryshnikov.

I've seen you often on the bus, moving by in trams or pedicabs at four A.M. Mostly, you don't see me. I could be anybody. I sweat blood and mercury and disguise myself in the flash colors of schizo subway hieroglyphics. Each graffito is a plea and a warning. Are you listening? I am. Those times when you do see me we acknowledge each other with our eyes, communicating in that strange hushed speech of the early morning, the heavy silence of steaming manhole covers and empty office tower lobbies. Neither of us can stand words, it's obvious. Still, I can't help wondering who you crossed, what you could have done to make them send me for you.

At night, I feel your heat. I know your heartbeat because it's my heartbeat, too. They gave me your heartbeat and told me to find you, to hunt you down by the rhythm and smell of your life. If I don't kill you, stop your heart, I will die in your place. My body will give out. I cannot live with this alien heartbeat for long.

They didn't bother telling me your name.

There's a thing in my head. Bright as chrome and smooth as polished jade, shaped like a bullet. It hums deep in my brain, like a cocoon restless to release the thing inside. It changes me. Thins my blood, scrambles my thoughts, hardens my eyes to fists of bright black ice. When they switch me on, I can see your bones and marrow, smell the life in you. *Variegate Erythropoietic Porphyria.* Yeah, the clockwork vampire, that's me. The Men In The Suits give me the Lugosi treatment when they want, send me out to kill, then turn me off through the bullet in my head. "Hemofluxing" they call it in accents that echo Harvard and Bangkok

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and Texas. Trust me on this one point: when they turn me on, it's better than dope. Better than speed or sex or music. They own me with it. The Men In The Suits have become my collective mother. I suckle on the thing in my head.

They birthed thirteen of us all together. Seven women, six men. A prime number; the number of a coven. Real cards, those government boys. They brought us back to the States and put the vampire bullets in all our heads, gave us eyes that went dead when we were switched on. There's eleven of us now. Soon there won't even be that many. I suppose that's why I'm here flying in this luxury tin can, moving at Mach Three above the south Atlantic telling you this.

Years ago, I lived in water. Clean white vaults of Antarctic ice one mile straight down, below the acid fogs and radiation leaks and cancerous fish. The bottom of the world, so far down that the walls still held fresh H_2O fossilized as ice. We were volunteers, thirteen cons among hundreds, on work furloughs from San Quentin. People were paying opium prices for that water, locked away from industrial waste and the dying ozone layer by a million years. But professional hydrominers would have taken too big a bite out of the profit margins of the cartel sponsoring the dig. So they got us. A sweet deal all around. They got their water on the cheap and we got a week knocked off our sentences for every day we worked.

They stenciled our prison ID's on the backs of our insulated worksuits. The microglass fibers smelled of mildew and urine and old sweat. Sealed inside the bulky suits we were sexless; behind our respirators faceless, blind grubs burrowing through white glacial meat, looking for a way out. I ran a cut-and-lift rig, heaving great slabs of the ancient underground seas from the walls and dropping them onto conveyors where they were hauled away to the processing rooms. I remember the suspended profiles of prehistoric fish and flowers, red dazzle of LED's off the polished umbilical couplings on the oxygen tanks, the Russian heads-up display I couldn't read. I felt at home and free and secure there, and at night I dreamed only in tones of silent white.

Once a week we showered. No lights in there. The guards wore night-vision goggles and carried cattle prods and mace. Men and women washed together, shuffling in two long rows under the spewing heads. Cheap acrylic patches marked the textured hull of the place, black and bulging like infected skin. I could always make her out in the nervous fluorescent light of the exits, moving by in the opposite direction behind the tattooed woman and just before the short, muscled man. At night, we bunked on padded pallets in curtained tiers of scaffolding. I traded bunks with other cons trying to find where she slept. Took the highest, filthiest perches

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in the place, where the padding had all but rotted away, before I tracked her down. When the man in the adjoining bunk refused to trade, I crushed him under the treads of my lift-rig during the next work shift. The foreman put it down as an industrial accident and requistioned another worker to take his place.

It had not occurred to me until I moved onto the pallet next to hers that the woman and the muscled man were lovers. I would lie there at night and listen to them, their quick and shallow breathing, the snake sound of her skin on his. I introduced myself and learned their names: Cale and Diega. She had a smile that was all canines. One of those women who can draw blood just by looking at you. Chew you up and suck the marrow out of your bones, and you thanking her the whole time. Cale was hooked, I could tell. Later, when I thought about it, I saw that he was the perfect candidate for Hemofluxing. Even back in the ice, Cale's eyes had had the hard dull look of that cheap costume jewelry you find in Hong Kong street stalls. Cale was Diega's pet. *Sit up and beg, dear.* Which doesn't mean she didn't love him. She liked me, too. At night, when Cale was off getting blown on the video games, I'd move onto their bunk. She liked me to rub her feet, working on the tight muscles of her instep, her ankles, making my way purposefully up her calves, thighs, to the blonde down of her belly. She'd touch the back of my head and tell me how much she liked my hair. I'd kiss her palms then and tell her fortune, making up stories for her. Sometimes Cale would come back and watch me working on her. He'd sit there at the far end of the bunk like some sloe-eyed gargoyle with his knees drawn up to his chest as I spread my fingers across Diega's legs or the small of her back. He would never speak, just stare at us with those blank TV eyes. Then I'd go back to my bunk and Cale would take over. Unlike him, I didn't like to watch.

Once at night I was holding onto one of the support struts outside my bunk, concentrating on the sounds she made—those round and strangely musical Tagalog vowels—when her hand moved from their curtained pallet and wrapped itself around mine. Held onto me the whole time. The veins in her wrist betrayed the tempo of her animal heart. Without wanting it, I had a clear and sudden vision of Diega as a child, grabbing onto mommy's or daddy's hand at the Manila Zoo. Wrapped in heat stink of melting candy and animal sweat, terrified of being swept away into the crowd of strangers' legs. Then felt the sudden pressure as she gasped the last few sudden syllables from beyond the curtain. I wondered then if I was being groomed as her new pet.

In our tenth month of frozen captivity, The Men In The Suits came for us.

* * *

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In the city it was easy to be invisible. During the day I slept. At night I would hunt, always careful to return to my apartment by dawn. The place was outfitted with special windows—double layers of polarized glass. Sometimes I would watch the clubs as they locked up in the morning. It scared me to look at them, so hollow and dumb in the daylight, like the frozen eyes of fish. But then night would drop down over the roofs and the eyes came alive, winking at me like the girls on the corner in their heels and tube tops as they whispered the price of love to the tourists. Girlskin the fashionable color of cataracts, ears sparkling with ripe clumps of tinted glass. And I was out there wading through them, letting the steaming tide of faces lick and break around me, listening to their hearts.

It's not so easy to be invisible in this damned jet. The bright-eyed young executives across the aisle keep sneaking glances at me in my little darkened corner of the first-class cabin, thinking I'm some eccentric Mafioso off on a retirement jaunt. I've killed many like them, crushed their stupid pink faces in my hands. When I own their heartbeats I own them. Listen: their bones are the ice I cut from the earth. The Men In The Suits had faces like these, transparent postcard faces you could hardly see, faces that were imposible to remember. They paid the cartel cash for us. Selected us thirteen from hundreds by means of some computer model, breaking down our personality types, our crimes and physical and intellectual attributes. We went with them because we were told to. Didn't know who they were, and they volunteered nothing about themselves. I still don't know who paid my rent. CIA? KGB? The phone company? Sometimes on the World Link news shows I would see the faces of people I'd killed for them. A Korean bio-chemist. A neo-expressionist painter. A Taiwanese porn actress. What could these people have had in common with each other? What could they have in common with you?

A confession: The first time I ever really felt alive was the first time they switched me on. I awoke in surgery, re-made with a voice in my head that told me secrets through the bullet in my brain. The voice told me to hunt and showed me how.

He was a Times Square hustler with a pixelated tattoo that flickered from a Maori design to a geisha to some corporate logo and back again. I picked him out of a weekend crowd of hundreds. Took him to one of those big holo theaters, him looking at me funny the whole time, neon caught in his eyes. At first I was nervous, terrified that he might not be the right one. But I could hear the staccato rhythm of his heart, smell the musk of his bones. His hands were on my legs, thinking I was shy. When I bent close to his face, he closed his eyes, leaving his throat exposed. That's when I took him. And came to life at that moment,

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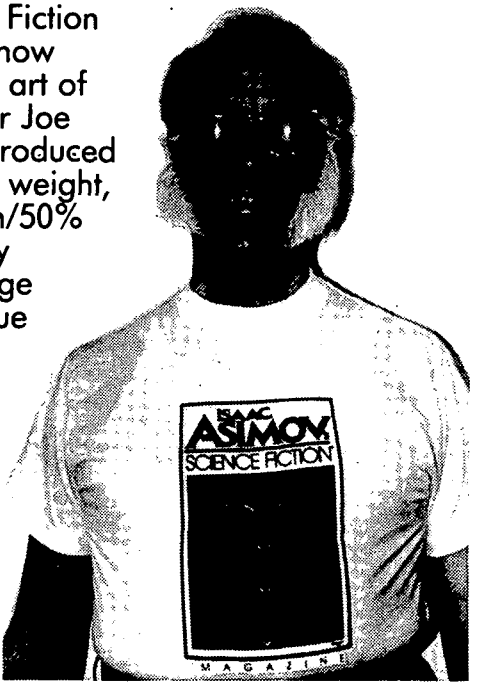

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thinking: *The sea is salt, and once I mined the seas. Blood is salt. Blood is the sea, and it lives inside me.* I sucked him dry and felt a hammer come down between my eyes, dropping me out of myself into some boiling liquid slipstream. And all I could see was a rhinestone dangling from the kid's earlobe, porn flaring off the cheap crystal like microwaves dancing off tin cans at the bottom of the ocean.

The Men In The Suits left nothing to chance. When they wanted us, they'd turn on the things in our heads, and we'd come running to them—wet and electric, giving off sparks. Up to their penthouse lofts in wood-paneled elevators with piped-in Muzak and shiny brass handrails marked with dull islands where our nervous hands had scrapped away the finish.

They worked Cale and me the most, which was fine by me. We drew a salary, but murder is mostly piecework. The Men In The Suits loved data. Loaded us down with diskettes, long green reams of printout and digitized photos of whoever's heartbeat they'd given us. Then there'd be medical records, financial statements, voice prints, gene prints, retinal scans, Federal, State and company ID's, lists of clubs, lists of lovers. The Men In The Suits loved data because they liked to pretend we were all cops in pursuit of some *higher ideal* and not just paid death. Back home, I'd dump most of the junk in the shredder and go out with only the photos in my pocket.

The shot they gave me of you shows you smiling in a tennis dress. There are palm trees behind you and a flat blue Mexican sky, but the tropical sun dazzling off your skin and white dress makes you look cool, like you're clothed in some inpenetrable snowbank.

Don't misunderstand me—sexual desire isn't the point here. There are four pints of blood in the average adult human body. You're doing fine, but I'm running on empty. Get the idea?

Cale was in Cairo, taking off some visiting German fusion entrepeneur. Diega and I were checking out shops in the Village. Quaint to die for. She bought a matte-black butterfly knife and studied her reflection in the storefronts, holding the blade up level with her eyes, making movie tough-guy faces, flicking it open and closed with a practiced casualness. We bought beer at a corner deli and she told me how one night she'd slit her mother's throat with a knife like that.

Said she'd been born in one of those Mindanao baby farms to a woman artificially inseminated with local sperm. Baby Diega headed for the U.S. pre-fab family market. They'd rounded her eyes and cooked out her melanin with nanoprocessors injected directly into the placenta. The little molecular devices had affected her eyes, leaving her left pupil

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permanently dilated. Her U.S. parents had returned her. The child hadn't quite fit their family ideal: could they trade her in for something else? "They sent me out three more times," she said. "But the mommies and daddies always sent me back."

When she was older, the farm sold her to a club outside the U.S. Naval base in Subic Bay where there were lots of daddies who wanted her. She said, "I learned how to dance and roll a joint and work them hard with my hands so that later they'd come fast." One night, she'd ripped off one of her johns and used all the credit on his chip to book a flight for the States. Before she'd left, though, Diega dropped by the *lebensborn* to carve her birth mother a second mouth. The cops were waiting for her when she landed in Honolulu. She shrugged as she told it. "I was just a kid," she said. And I couldn't tell if she was sorry for killing Mom or for getting nailed for it.

I bought her a set of knuckledusters from a leather queen on Houston Street. They were too big for her hand, but she managed to hook three of her fingers in the proper holes, letting her pinky dangle in the opening between the rings and the curved brace that pressed against her palm. Then she laid the knuckles along the side of my jaw. "Did you really kill your mother?" I asked. She smiled. "No, my father. He molested my sister and me, so I blew him away with his hunting rifle."

"That a fact."

"Actually, Mom and Dad run a taco stand in Dallas. I got popped for selling PCP cut with arsenic to a cop's son."

In the video display in a shop window I could see her pressing the metal to my jaw from a dozen different angles and slightly out of register. I wondered what kind of story she'd told to hook Cale. "Is it just me," I asked, "or do you like to fuck with everybody's head?"

She smiled and took the knuckles away. Kissed me where she'd held them. "Only you, dear," she replied. "It wouldn't be special if I did it with everybody." She stole the last cigarette out of my coat and smoked it as we walked home.

Thinking about it now, it seems like the kind of wild animal game kids play with each other without ever thinking about. When I was six we lived in Queens and rode our bikes around unlit parking lots all night, trying to knock each other over in the dark, weaving like ghost bats between the concrete barriers at the end of the parking spaces. We told each other that parking lots were old paved-over cemetaries and that the yellow lines marking off the spaces were put there so people could find the graves.

Diega, God I want to see her now. Want to put her back there in that white space where I found her. Crack my skull and let it all run out, all

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that whiteness I used to dream of back in the mines. That was Diega I was dreaming of. Not the white itself, but her moving there, underneath it all, pulling the strings and making it run. White of knuckles all those times I dreamed of hitting her, the white of fossil fish, ice white, Crank white, the white of teeth and surgical masks, white of new moons and phosphenes, stuttering fluorescent white, spark white—each tiny nova hotter than hell, but too small to make any difference, pus white, larval white, the white of surrender, eye white appearing between half-closed lids when she'd bite her lip, shake and breathe those short percussive vowels.

The three of us were like those kids in the parking lots: quick flash of steel in the dark, laughing and flying blind across a broken chain link landscape. Diega used Cale and me and we let her. We used her, too, forming a kind of perfect loop. The only perfect thing I've ever done. Sometimes I wondered if the Men In The Suits knew anything about us. They seemed totally blind to what we were doing to each other between jobs, acting out these ritualized murders of each others' desires. At other times, though, I'd think that I'd gotten it all wrong. That the Men In The Suits knew exactly what we were doing. That they'd planned it this way, breaking down the pattern of our mutual addiction into a binary expression of absolute need, feeding it all into some government mainframe and watching us run—plotting our actions as data diagrams and flow charts, a perfect arc of obsession.

Could it have happened that way? Could it be that the computer model that placed us here in this place at this time incorporates algorithms so complex and subtle that they can predict the very shapes of our souls? I suppose it's possible, but after the Men In The Suits were all dead it was too late to ask them what went wrong.

I was on the back end of a two week job in Sydney, skullblasted and cross-eyed, blown through the dateline and half-a-dozen time zones on one of those tinker toy Burmese sub-orbitals. You know the type—Ten G's. No Waiting. Everything was moving in dreamtime by the time I hit Kennedy, so it took a while to work through the static when the Men In The Suits told me she was gone. We rode in the company car. I stared out through the smoked glass and changed channels on the radio, trying to find something I liked. Finally, I settled on an Arab newscast on one of the World Link stations, turning it up loud enough to drown out the Men's irritating chatter. They finally shut up and dropped me at my apartment. Inside, I threw my bag in a corner and sat in the dark for a long time, massaging a gnawing ache at the base of my skull. Around dawn, I woke up with spiders cakewalking across the surface of my brain and a strange new animal beat working my heart. I sucked in air and

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started to cry because I suddenly knew what the Men In The Suits had been trying to tell me and just whose heartbeat they'd saddled me with.

Lately, I like to think that Diega had been trying to tell me what she'd sensed about my true role in our little troika, setting the wheels spinning in some unlit antechamber of my unconscious with her stories about the *lebensborn* and the sailor she ripped off. Maybe trying in her own way to make it easier for me by letting me know that it was nothing personal, that it was just the way things were. She had to run and I had to follow. That's when I realized she had done it again: re-played that bad old night in Subic City. Lay down with whoever the Men In The Suits had set her on, playing him like one of those vague and faceless tricks, leaving him broken-necked and penniless in some five-hundred-dollar-a-night furnished suite.

Diega Braga. The last time I saw her, she was lying next to poor broken Cale in a dumpster. The gun still in his hand, my teeth marks on them both. The Men In The Suits told me what they knew before I killed them, too. Diega and Cale had never stood a chance. The guy she took off was a courier for some Swiss banking heavies, moving funds for men who had a deep and spiritual relationship with other people's money. When Diega killed the guy, when his distinctive brain wave pattern stopped, it activated a simple cortex implant, immediately freezing all his assets. The credit chip Diega took off him was so much dead plastic. Couldn't get a shoe shine with that thing, much less a plane ticket. I found the two of them coming out of a club on Bleecker Street where they'd been trying to sell the Swiss's credit to some local chip hackers. We danced together then, three of us. In the alley, on a carpet of broken wine bottles and fluttering leaflets, we painted the town red.

Twenty miles up and halfway around the world I can still feel your heat. The stewardesses give us pillows, coffee and our choices of three grades of recreational neural stimulants. We'll be landing at Byrd Station within the hour. "An adventure at the bottom of the world," the video at the tourist office said. "Witness white-capped vistas older than Man himself." It'll be easy to lose these tourist assholes once we've landed and cop a snowmobile. I still remember where the hydrominers store those big transports out on the tundra. With one of those, I'll be able to get far enough into the mountains that they'll never find me, and I won't be tempted to come after you. That's the difference between Diega and me. I wanted to get away. I don't know if death was what she was really looking for, but I do know that in the end, she didn't care either way.

The Men In The Suits didn't have to give me her heartbeat, but they did. Diega and Cale didn't have to remain in a city I knew so well, but they stayed. How like her to have hung around, playing on the thinnest

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ice she could find. Or maybe she didn't think about it at all. Maybe she was just another fuck-up like me.

I don't believe very much anymore. I only know this—the reason I'm here, the reason I killed the Men In The Suits is not because they switched me on and sent me out to do my friends. I could have spared Diega and Cale in the same way I'm going to spare you. (Sit up straight and smile—I'm willing your heartbeat back to you. I don't want it anymore. Can't bear the weight of it.) No, when I'm honest with myself, I know the reason that I killed them all was not because Diega chose Cale, but because she didn't choose me. A subtle difference, but an important one.

But I'm in old territory here. Maybe this confession is just my stumble-bum try at turning off the bullshit detectors once and for all, and hope that the guilty ghosts will follow. For now, I'll put their faces in my pocket with all the other faces I've taken, and keep running. The Men In The Suits had bosses, too, you know. And they didn't like what I did to their boys, no, not one little bit. I left a fortune's worth of that bottom of the world water lapping at the edges of their penthouse, gallons of it. Watched it turning pink around their bodies, soaking into their monogrammed shirt sleeves, floating strands of hair and shredded reams of printout. I cleaned myself in their million dollar water and left that church-quiet meat market, closing the door behind me.

Sacked out on soft leather in first-class. A few seats ahead of me, drunken middle management-types are coming on to the stewardesses and I'm thinking that I'd like to tear out their skinny pink throats. The thing in my head is growling at me, telling me I'm hungry and how easy it would be to open you up and drink you down. All I have to do is turn around, a cute trick twenty miles up. The farther I move from you, the more desperate the thing in my head becomes, till it's buzzing in my brain like a wasp trapped in a bell jar. This light is agony. My skin is curdled milk. When I hold my hand up, I can almost see the bones beneath. You'll never know how hard it is for me to leave you. If it wasn't for the dope the smiling stewardesses keep handing out, I'd never make it.

The recreational stimulants work on the limbic system, exciting glutamate receptors in the hippocampus and amygdala. Memories blow and burn like smoke. Imagine fast-flipping channels on World Link, each image superimposing itself on the one before. Kids on bikes. Fossilized fish. Glittering butterfly knives. I remember being sick just before my flight to Sydney. At the time, I'd thought it was the flu, but now I know it was the sickness of separation. Diega was cutting the cord and setting me adrift. I was in the bathroom splashing water on my face when she came in, closing the door behind her. She touched my hip and unzipped

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me there by the sink, wrapping her legs around me. We made it there on the floor. Hours later, going through Customs in Australia, I could still smell her skin on my hands. The white tile had been cold and bright behind the spiked fan of her hair, like the walls of the ice mine years ago, and when white appeared for a moment between her partially closed lids, I had the electric vision that the back of her head was a globe of clear crystal. I still dream of that sight, thinking that if only I could have found my way inside of her skull, I might have cut out whatever drove her and stopped her from running away.

Out the port window, I can see the ice fields of the South Polar Plateau. I still feel her moving underground, drawing us together there under the ice, on those worn and wooden pallets. I move my hands across her back, digging in the blizzards and ice floes of her flesh, hold her there in that moment, listen to her stuttering climax with someone else. Just before she leaves me she takes me on the floor, spreading her robe and sliding over me like the shadow of a crow, pulling me to her. Chilled tile along my back as she tugs my shirt over my head. I'm drunk and snowblind, catching her face in slashes of color that burn like the inside of my skull. The thing in my head is cooking me and I'm afraid. When I touch the ground, my footsteps will boil holes in the ice. Someone will follow me and I'll have to dance with them the way I danced with poor Diega. But before I do, before we sink together forever into that endless white I'll say it to them once so that they'll understand: I'm home. ●

NAZCA LINES

Picture this: an old brown man
writing the lines of his life
on a blank earthen page. The sun burns
its own tracks across his face.
One can read age, sex, race
and a thousand decisions there.
One can read a poem
to the mountain gods at Nazca.
Picture this: the gods bending
over the dusty page, over the plate land,
peering into the souls of scriveners
who sketch their obeisances
into the isolated stone.

—Jane Yolen

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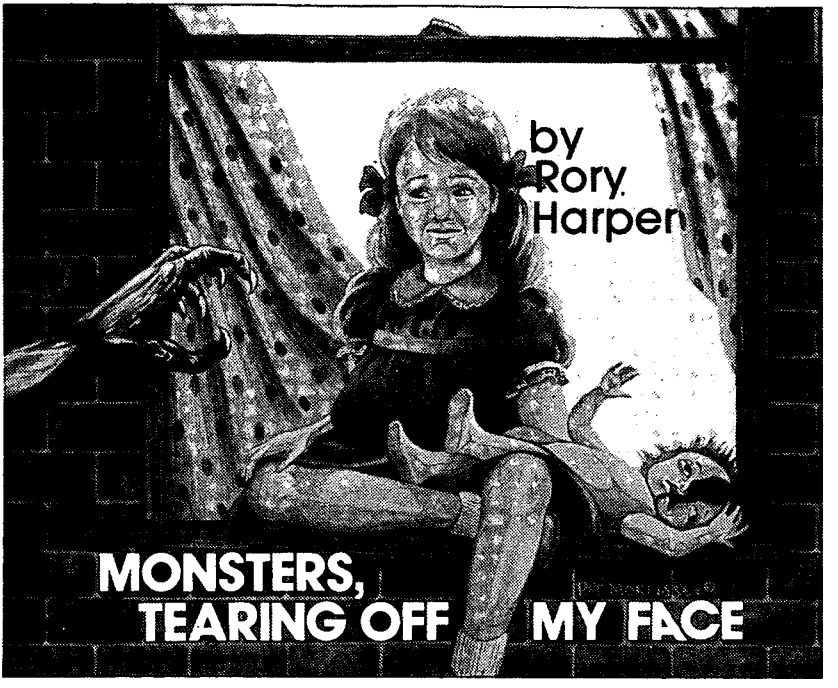

Rory Harper is a Texas writer whose debut novel, *Petrogypsies,* will be out from Baen Books this fall. He tells us he wrote the following tale after he learned his wife was pregnant. It is his first story to appear in *IAsfm.*

art: Patricia Morrissey

I was drawing a true picture.

Miss Kendall asked me. "What is that picture, Eileen?"

I telled her. "Mommy and Daddy and me."

She made a noise. "Oh, no, sweetheart, those are monsters. That can't be your mommy and daddy."

"Yes. Mommy and Daddy."

"But they're blue and they have long claws and teeth. That's what monsters have, not mommies and daddies."

"Yes." I don't argue. "Monsters. Mommy and Daddy."

"What are they doing?"

I looked at the picture. It isn't finished. "They are tearing off my face. So I won't be a little girl any more."

Miss Kendall looked sad.

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I telled her. "I don't mind when they do it. They love me."

After nap time, Miss Kendall taked me to the office. A nice lady was there.

She sitted in a chair beside me. "Hello, Eileen. I'm Patricia Adler."

"Hello, Miss Adler."

"I'm with the Children's Protective Service. Do you know what that is?"

I shaked my head from side to side like a little girl. "No."

"How old are you, dear?"

I showed her my fingers. "One-two-three-four."

"Well, Eileen, we try to help children who may be having problems. With their Mommy or Daddy."

"Oh. Okay."

She taked the picture I made. It is finished now. "You told Miss Kendall that these blue monsters are your Mommy and Daddy. Is that right?"

I shaked my head up and down like a little girl. "Yes."

"What are they doing?"

I telled her. "Tearing off my face. So I won't be a little girl any more."

"Does it hurt when they do that?"

"Yes. I am crying. But I don't mind. They love me."

"Is this something you saw on television, dear?"

I shaked my head. "No. It is a true picture."

"It happened to you?"

"Yes."

"Did it happen more than once?"

"Yes."

"Did you bleed, like in the picture?"

"Yes. And then they teared off the rest of my body and I am not a little girl any more."

Miss Adler looked sad.

Miss Adler taked me to the place where I stayed now. She bringed the picture, too.

Mommy taked me to my room. I sitted on the stairway and listened.

Daddy telled Miss Adler. "She was about two years old. A security guard found her on the roof of a downtown building. If you'd check with your agency, there should be a file."

Miss Adler asked. "You didn't go through Child Welfare for the adoption?"

Mommy telled Miss Adler. "No. When her parents couldn't be located, she was placed into a foster home with a private agency. The Christian Child Aid Society. We adopted her through them."

"Was there any evidence of physical abuse when they found her?"

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"Not by the time we got her. But there may be something in your files that we haven't seen. She cried a lot for the first six months we had her, but that's gone completely away. She has nightmares occasionally, wakes up screaming in the middle of the night, but she claims not to remember what she was dreaming about."

"She hasn't been a difficult child?"

Daddy telled Miss Adler. "Oh, no. She's a delightful, wonderful little girl. We love her very much. I can't even imagine why anyone would have abandoned her."

Mommy telled Miss Adler. "It gives me the shudders to think this picture is how she remembers her real parents. What kind of monsters could they have been? Would you like some more coffee?"

It was dark. I looked out the window, into the dark. They would come from the dark for me.

Under my bed was dark. I looked under my bed, too.

Then it was bed time. I looked in the dark closet and then I climbed in the bed.

I woked up when Mommy and Daddy opened the door. Their face was dark in the dark room. Daddy turned on the light. He looked mad. Mommy looked mad, too.

He picked me up in the air and shaked my little girl body. "Eileen, you have been a very bad little girl."

I did not cry. I telled him. "I am sorry, Daddy."

"Don't you ever, ever draw pictures like that again." He shaked me more. "Don't tell lies about Mommy and Daddy like that."

I don't argue. "I am sorry, Daddy."

"You've been very bad and I'm going to have to punish you." He throwed me on the bed.

He taked off my nightie again. Mommy watched.

I started to cry.

Then the window breaked from the outside and the dark came in.

I looked. On the window sitted my real Mommy and Daddy. I runned to my real Mommy.

My real Daddy teared off the face of my other Daddy and Mommy with his claws. Underneath was a red and white face. My other Mommy and Daddy cried and cried. Then my real Daddy teared off the body of my other Mommy and Daddy. Underneath was a red and white body.

Then my real Mommy teared off my face with her claws. I could not see my new face. Then she teared off my body so I wouldn't be a little girl any more. Underneath was a pretty blue body. It hurt. I cried and she holded me.

Then my real Daddy picked up my new body and taked me to the window.

Then we went away into the dark, where the monsters stay. ●

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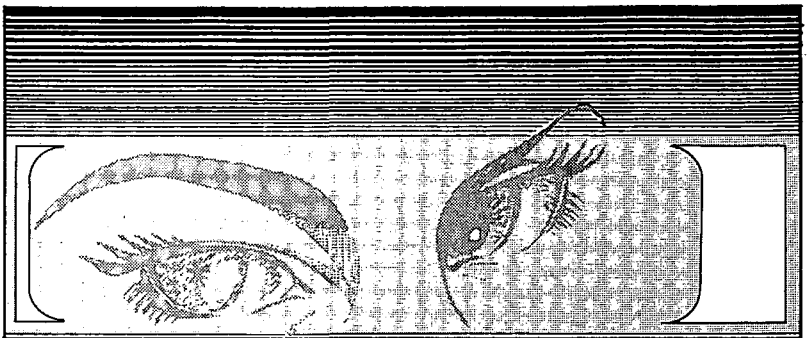

THE BRIDE

Hair? No question there. What else would it be?
Red. Not carrot red though. Mars has enough carrot red hair.
Eyes? Green. Startling, bright green.
Can you believe I've never known anyone with green eyes?
Nose? Surprise me.
(You can have it redone can't you?)
Mouth? Full. Ripe. Like a high school cheerleader's.
Dad always said women with thin lips weren't good lovers.
Though I never found it true, why tempt fate?
Height? Never been particular, been in love
with both short and tall.
Legs, skin tone, voice, laugh, eyebrows (never thought of that!)
Lots of questions here,
the gene shop doesn't leave anything to the imagination!
All the psychological questions now.
Really about me I suppose.
Wonder what type of questions the women answer?
Approve the holodisc image
and we have our mate,
better than someone off the transport.
Hardly anyone wants to come anyway,
the life is boring and sometimes hard.
That cuts down on the prospects.
Idyllic it is not, but in general, peaceful
knowing that even in the Martian deserts,
even in the Martian deserts,
someone cares, even artificially.

—Roger Dutcher
29 December 1986

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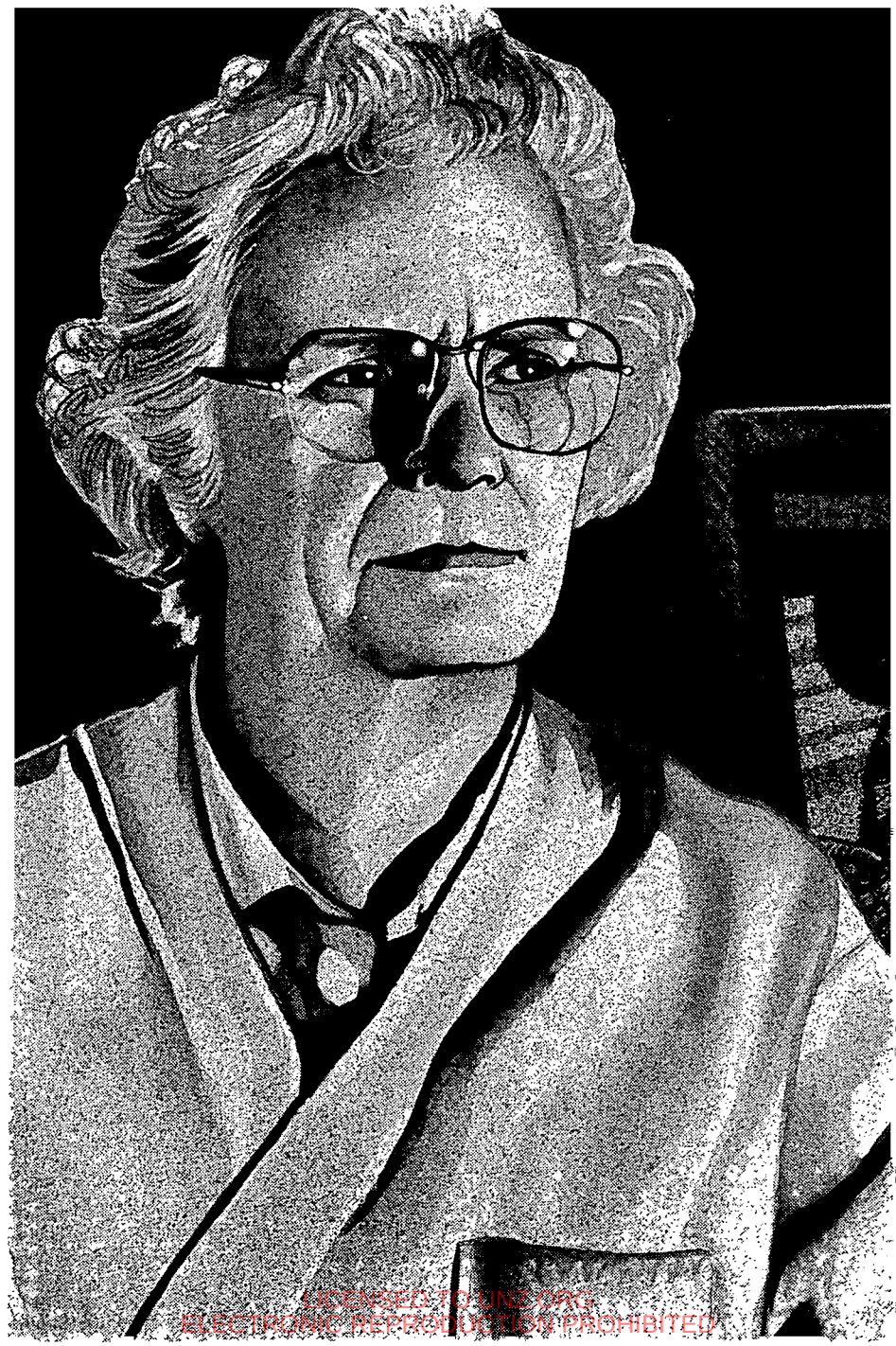

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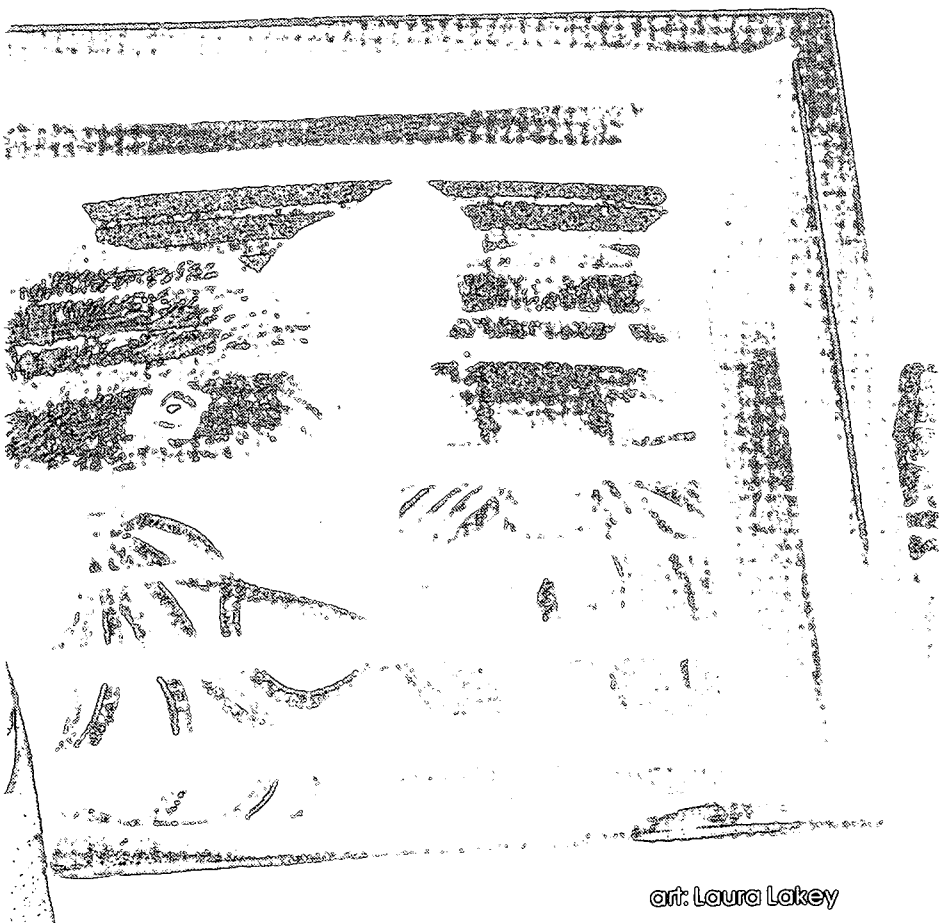
NOT WITHOUT HONOR

by Judith Moffett

Judith Moffett, the winner of the 1988 John W. Campbell Award for best new writer, currently has a novelette, "The Hob" (*IAsfm*, May 1988), on the final ballot for the 1989 Nebula awards.



art: Laura Lakey

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The party wasn't a very loud one; the burp of the phone could easily be heard. Bill Nash answered and passed it at once to the oldest person present, who put down her plate and fork, finished laughing at Seth Gibson's joke, glanced at the screen, and said, "Hi, Gordon," into the speaker.

"I need you down here right now, Patsy."

The old woman winced; nobody but her boss had called her Patsy since high school, but she couldn't seem to break him of the habit. "Can't it wait an hour or so? We're having a party up here."

"No it can't," he said curtly. "Sorry."

He didn't sound sorry. The screen was too little to show much expression, but Pat thought he looked upset, and for the first time felt a slight flicker of interest. "What's it about?"

"Get down here and I'll tell you. Now." He broke the connection and Pat hung up, feeling aggrieved. She wasn't a great one for parties as a rule, but as guest of honor at this one she'd been enjoying herself, and the cake was excellent.

The party, a dual-purpose occasion, had been thrown to celebrate both Pat Livingston's sixty-eighth birthday and the completion of the riverine forest biome she had come to Mars to set up. Could Gordon have turned up an operational glitch in the past half-hour, or a mistake in the accounts? NASA was a bitch about accounts; that might be it. Hard to get worked up about. Pat was due to go home soon; people her age didn't thrive on Mars, and she had been working on Biosphere VII for ten months already, which was pushing it. She was hardly counting the days—work on the jungle biome had absorbed her more pleasurably than anything she'd ever done, not excluding her two years spent sealed into Biosphere IV in the Arizona desert, and nothing but the boredoms of retirement awaited her on Earth—but the prospect of not having to jump when Gordon Anderson said "frog" looked inviting at that moment, when she hung the speaker back on its hook, put away her last three bites of birthday cake, and told the other celebrants, "Save another slice of this for me, if you can bear to."

There were groans. Her assistant, Jackie Billington, gave her a smile—the youngsters on the project were as respectful and nice to Pat as they were acidic about their boss—and said, "I'd have another before I left, if I were you. Johnny's had his eye on that cake. Let the old crab steam a minute, it won't kill him."

"Yeah," Seth chimed in. "If he wants to see you so bad he can't wait, he knows where to find you."

Cakes were not as easily come by as all that in the Sphere. Pat took Jackie's advice. But when the phone burped again a couple of minutes

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later she tossed her plate on the table, looking resigned. "Tell him I'm on my way, the rat."

An eight-minute walk carried her through the jungle with its trees, vines, flowers, parrots, hummingbirds, and insects, across a scrubby patch of savannah beside the little "ocean," and through the grid of framed garden beds and tilled fields to the Office. Structurally, Biosphere VII was almost identical to the one she'd lived in on Earth, but a little bigger and a lot better built (it had to be). The habitats had been beautiful in the Arizona desert; in the desert wastes of Mars they were enough to snatch away one's breath and bring tears to one's eyes. Martian daylight, admitted in measured amounts through automatically adjusted overhead louvres, glittered on the surface of the water, which was broken rhythmically by the action of a wave machine. It was all so new, and so thrilling and inspirational, that Pat's bad mood dissolved before she had come a hundred feet, and she entered the Office smiling and brushing crumbs from her sweater, with a piece of cake for Gordon, a burnt offering, wrapped in a paper napkin.

She found her boss crouched over a viewer screen. He waved the gift away. "God damn it, Patsy, when I say now I mean *now*."

Pat's eyebrows went up. Gordon may have been personally unpopular with his staff, but he was a capable administrator with a cool head. She had never before seen him rattled, and realized that the situation called for tact. The man was fifteen years younger than she, after all, and *much* less famous. It would have been a difficult job for a far more relaxed and confident person than Gordon Anderson, to be Captain and have Pat Livingston for a subordinate officer. "Well, I'm here now," she said soothingly. "What's up?"

"*That* is, by God." He jabbed a finger at the screen. "Just you have a look at that and tell me what you make of it."

Pat peered at the viewscreen. From halfway across the Office she could make little of what she saw there, and went around the desk for a better look. Gordon moved back to give her room. Finally she sat with her nose almost touching the screen.

The picture was fuzzy and unsteady, a composite of blacks, whites, and grays. It showed a group of shapes reared against a blank background. Even allowing for the poor resolution of the picture, the shapes did not look much like people. They looked like something else: animals, perhaps—a circus act of performing terriers dressed up in dark pants and skirts and white sweaters. Terriers or bears; it was impossible to get an accurate idea of their size—one could see only strangeness, and awkwardness. The shapes were wearing little hats, black, with black lobes, which reminded Pat of something. But the snakelike coiling things on

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either side of their faces—if those were faces—reminded her of nothing on Earth.

"It's a live transmission," he growled in response. "Or it was, until I taped it an hour ago."

"A *live* one? Sent from where?"

"From space, near as I can tell. There's audio as well."

Sure enough, a thin sound was seeping from the speakers. Gordon punched keys, and suddenly the hair on the back of Pat's neck stood up as a keening, wailing *song* emerged from the lumpy things on the screen.

"Christ Almighty!"

"Yeah," said Gordon.

"And this is being transmitted to *us?*"

"Who knows? It's the frequency we talk to Houston on."

"Who the hell could they *be?* Russians, Chinese? Japanese? Swedes?"

"Patsy, those things've got *tentacles!*" her supervisor yelled, at the absolute end of his patience. "They could be right next door to us here, and we are God damn sitting ducks if they decide to do anything about *us,* because we sure can't do one God damn thing about *them!*"

Astonishment straightened Pat out of her crouch. "Pull yourself together, chum! Who the hell do you think that *is* out there, aggravated Martians howling 'Yankee Go Home'?"

Gordon's teeth ground together, an awful sound. He gave her a furious look, hating—even in this extremity—that insubordinate "chum." "The tentacles, *Patsy.* Use your eyes." His own rolled in his pasty face. "While you're about it, use your ears. I've been playing that tape for the past hour, listening to that banshee noise. Can you honestly call that a *human* sound?"

Pat planted her fists on her wide hips and looked her boss in the eye. "Then why, if they aren't human, are they singing the Mouseketeer Hymn?"

Gordon's eyes bugged right out of his head. "You don't mean to say that godawful racket is something you *recognize—*"

"That's exactly what I do mean." Though admittedly the sound quality was so poor—poor as the picture quality, full of pops and cracklings—that you'd have to be somebody like Pat to identify the resemblance. Somebody who, for reasons of her own, could win any trivia contest about the Mickey Mouse Club, hands down—who could tell the last names and ages of all the Mouseketeers, even the most obscure and unpublicized of the lot: Billie Beanblossom, 11, Jay-Jay Solari, 12, Bronson Scott, 8 . . . there probably weren't more than half a dozen such people left alive. One could hardly blame Gordon for not identifying the song himself.

But in Pat's mind there could be no shred of doubt. Not, at any rate, about the Hymn—and yet, even as she insisted, a doubt crept in. Without

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taking her eyes off the screen she felt behind her on the desk for the rejected piece of cake, unwrapped it, and began to break off hunks and eat them. A chocolate fudge cake with chocolate icing, very familiar, very comforting. Assuredly the things on the screen were neither. "Some kind of hoax," she mumbled through crumbs, already not so sure. "Soviets in bear suits. A practical joke."

"You know that's nonsense," Gordon said shortly. "It would be the most expensive practical joke in history." He paced the length of the room and back again, while Pat licked her fingers clean, before bringing himself to add: "What in perdition, *if* you don't mind my asking, is a Mouseketeer Hymn?"

"A hymn-style setting of the Mickey Mouse Club theme, from a TV show I used to watch when I was a kid, back in the Neolithic Era." The skirts and pants the Mouseketeers wore were supposed to be a kind of bright blue. Pat knew that, because she'd subscribed to the *Mickey Mouse Club Magazine,* which had run a lot of color pictures; but on TV, of course, they had always looked gray. Mickey Mouse Club had been filmed between 1955 and 1958, and that was before color TV.

If you were Russian or Chinese you could get somebody to look up old copies of *MMC Magazine* and make your Mouseketeer uniforms blue. If, on the other hand, you lived near Aldebaran or someplace like that and formed your ideas from the information at hand, naturally you'd think . . . unless . . . "*Is* that a color transmission?"

"It is. Those are the real colors, or lack of same."

They were butchering the Hymn something fearful, but that didn't stop it from running through Pat's head the way it ought to have sounded. The tape ended; Gordon cursed, spun the wheel and played it over from the beginning. Again the group formed in perfect mimicry of Hymn formation; again they began to sing, *a capella* where the Mouseketeers had had backup music, but clearly they were doing their best to persuade whoever might be listening into coming along and singing their song and joining their family. They began to spell out Mickey Mouse's name.

Pat said musingly, "How could they possibly not be human? On the other hand, what humans could they possibly be?"

Gordon made a strangled noise. "They *sound* like a band of kazoos. They *look* like a troupe of skinny trained bears with tentacle mustachios. I don't know *what* the fuck they are." He groped behind him for a button on the console. "Security, get down here right now."

The order sounded much more useful than it was. "Security," on Mars, meant keeping the Biosphere leakproof; even to paranoid NASA, defensive security hadn't seemed necessary. Later on it might, but projectile weapons could never be risked, for fear of puncturing the shell of the Sphere. For the time being Gordon might arm a couple of his off-duty

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hydraulics engineers with power hammers, which might be a little bit useful if the Mouseketeers invaded personally, but pointless if they attacked from space. In fact, if they attacked from space there wasn't a thing the staff could do to protect the Biosphere or themselves—Gordon had been right about that.

It struck Pat that a First Contact begun with the Mouseketeer Hymn might easily end with a nuclear warhead, the extremity of the latter being no weirder than the insanity of the former.

The group of ersatz Mouseketeers wailed on. An individual in the front took up a solo line, assuring the listeners of a friendship that would outlast time and distance; then once again, with eerie gravity, the full chorus began to spell out Mickey's name.

Pat said suddenly, "Does it strike you that a kids' show theme song about family and friendship makes an odd declaration of war? Let's everybody calm down here a minute—let's try to hear if they changed the words at all."

Gordon frowned, but for once had the sense not to interfere. "I don't *know* the words," one of the troubleshooters complained. Pat filled him in, and they all listened intently while the recording played yet again.

"There," she said. "Run it back a little bit. Now play that part again." And sure enough, the words did seem a little different. The two smallest Mouseketeers (named Cubby and Karen) had always sung with more than sufficient adorableness, in unison, the penultimate line of the Hymn, which declared that it was time now to bid their company farewell. The intruders had changed that part of the song. "Can you slow it down?" He did; and now the others heard it too.

They played the phrase half a dozen times. "Definitely 'hello.' Definitely '*from your* company.' More of a greeting than a challenge, wouldn't you say?"

"How do we know what an alien means by 'hello'?" Gordon snapped. Pat and the security team had already calmed down some as they'd grown used to the idea of there *being* aliens out there, trying to get through to them; Gordon had not, not by very much.

"How do we know what they mean by turning up as Mouseketeers?" Pat snapped back. "*Something,* surely. Gordon, far be it from me to tell you your business, but mightn't it be an idea to get Houston on the horn? I'd say the UN," she said, "except the UN would mean Special Sessions and debates, and I don't suppose—"

"My God, that would take days! What am I supposed to do in the meantime? It'll have to be NASA, like it or not."

None of them liked it. Gordon looked as gray as the blobs on the viewscreen, who chose that moment to waver and disappear abruptly in a burst of static. Another live transmission was coming in.

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"Here we go again," said one of the troubleshooters with a certain nervous relish, and—when Gordon made no move—hit the switch to kill the tape. Immediately the picture cleared, or resolved somewhat less poorly, into a close-up of a single costumed bearlike, and plainly and unequivocally alien, creature. Its head crowned with Mickey Mouse ears and the Mouseketeer shirt below, were, to put it mildly, an unnerving sight. There could be no question any longer: it was First Contact, ready or not, surreal or not. It was here.

Tentacles coiled; words emerged. "Hi, Mouseketeers. We didn't know you folks had left your planet surface. This is just great." Its voice, inflectionless and squeaky, seemingly formed these words with a good deal of difficulty; but after the barely articulated words of the Hymn the flawless Fifties English of this creature was startling. Moving nearer the camera it grew larger on the screen. They saw that its shirt bore markings: JIMMIE, marching in large black letters across it, with black squiggles below.

"Oh my God," Gordon moaned. Nobody else said anything.

"There are fourteen of us, and we'll be arriving in your neighborhood in three of this planet's days. It might be dangerous for us to meet personally—it's possible we could make each other sick—but we're very eager to talk with you. We can't receive you now, while we're in transit, but we'll be able to talk just as soon as we land. We've got lots of questions."

The tentacles seemed to produce the sounds that formed words; at least these were still only when the alien wasn't speaking. Now, speech concluded, it moved back, unblocking their view of the group behind him. Cubby-scribble and Karen-scribble began to sing goodbye—and this time the word *was* goodbye. Jimmie-scribble, inflectionless as ever, promised they would all meet again soon. Finally the screen went blank.

After conferring with Houston, Gordon called a meeting of all the Biosphere personnel. It was necessary to do this, but because the Mouseketeers frightened him almost to the point of gibbering, the meeting began badly. Gordon was a hydraulics engineer by training, an administrator partly by ability, largely by default. He was in no way military-minded, nor particularly imaginative, though superbly intuitive at his proper work of commanding the flow of water. Probably he could have handled a First Contact that followed a more conventional script, but the Disney version threw him flat.

Their chief's near-paralysis made it difficult for the others to take in what had happened, and there was a lot of confusion and fear. Back on Earth quite a few of them would have welcomed this development; here they were too few, and felt too exposed.

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"Fortunately, we've got an expert on Mickey Mouse Club aboard, so I've asked her to think about what it might mean that the ET's have chosen to appear in Mouseketeer drag," Gordon concluded, and grinned a ghastly grin.

The staff had assembled in the commissary, the only room big enough to hold them all. They could have conferred via screens, or even by phone, but they needed to be together. Feeling as if she were at a town meeting, Pat rose to address her fellow citizens: "I'll tell you what I know, but you'll have to help me work out what it means, because at this point I haven't a clue.

"Mickey Mouse Club was a bright idea of Walt Disney's, back in his creative heyday—or creative second wind, I guess I should say. Disney always planned his best feature films along the same rough plotlines. You take a kid with inadequate or absent parents, or no parents at all—an emotional orphan. You provide at least one substitute parent figure, much better than the real parents in every way. Then, typically, you interpose various obstacles and misunderstandings between the child and the parent figure. Everybody goes through the grinder for a while, but in the end the parent-substitute and the orphan are allowed to have each other.

"In some movies an animal—dog, horse, lamb, whatever—is introduced instead of, or in addition to, the figure of the Good Parent; but the dynamic of emotional deprivation at the start, emotional fulfillment at the end, and suffering and struggling in between, is just the same. A major part of Disney's genius was understanding that fundamental myth of the child given the parent or parents of his dreams, who understand and accept and love him *for himself,* exactly as he is."

Bill Nash said, "Weren't the classic Disney cartoons conceived along the same lines? Cinderella was an emotionally deprived child, so was Snow White. Both of them had wicked stepmothers too. Sounds like the same old story."

Pat considered this. "Well, yes and no. Snow White and Cinderella weren't really children anymore. The mythic force that saved *them* wasn't the Good Parent, it was the Handsome Prince.

"So anyway, Mickey Mouse Club was an adulterated TV version of that other myth. A bunch of perfectly happy, normal kids who could sing and dance were recruited and given a kind of Scoutmaster figure to lead them and help them and teach them things. And that was Jimmie Dodd."

"Jimmie!" Gordon interjected, starting halfway out of his chair.

"Jimmie." Pat nodded. "Without him the show wouldn't have amounted to a hill of beans. He provided the—the spiritual backbone . . . maybe I should say the backbone, or foundation, of *reality* for the show. He was the myth made flesh. See, a lot of the routines were pretty hokey. The

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kids had to *smile* all the time, as wide as they could, and they'd cheer and jump around like fleas . . . and their mothers were jealous and competitive as cats, they were everything you hear about stage mothers apparently. Some of the Mouseketeers were replaced after the first year because they didn't get enough mail from viewers. I corresponded with one of them myself for a while, and he told me to ask all my friends to write in to the studio saying 'We like Mouseketeer So-and-so,' if we did, because the volume of fan mail determined who got canned and who didn't. So it was commercial showbiz as usual in a lot of respects; but Jimmie Dodd was real."

Gordon said, "Getting down to brass tacks, what conclusions do you think we should draw from the fact that the, ah, visitors have appeared with a spokesperson labeled 'Jimmie,' backed up by a choir that's a bunch of imitation Hollywood brats?"

"Gordon, I wish I knew," said Pat. "I find that fact as interesting as all get out, but as I already told you, I don't know any better than you do what to make of it. We're all going to have to brainstorm together and see what we come up with." She sat down.

Seth Gibson, the desert plant specialist from Las Cruces, broke the crackling silence. "If we take imitation to be the sincerest form of flattery . . ."

Jackie Billington jumped in: "Then for some reason Mickey Mouse Club was—is—the aliens' favorite TV program. *What* reason?"

"I remember Mickey Mouse Club," Clare Hodge, the marine biologist, put in, "but I don't remember any Jimmie Dodd, or any adults at all. Just a lot of rock and roll music, and kids running around"

"That would have been the revival in the Seventies," Pat explained. "Disney was dead by then, and apparently nobody in the studio, at least nobody who had any say-so, had the dimmest understanding of that orphans-and-parents theme I was talking about before. They mounted the revival without a Jimmie-figure, just kids in perpetual motion and lots of background racket. It didn't last out its first season."

"How do you *know* all this stuff, Pat?" asked Clare, and at the same instant Jackie said, "Couldn't they have gotten the original Jimmie back?"

Pat chose to answer Jackie instead of Clare. "By then, he was dead too. Of a tropical disease he picked up in Hawaii, filming a new show."

Jackie returned to her first point. "So why would Mickey Mouse Club, of all things, be an alien's favorite show, if that's what it is?"

"You know, I just realized—this confirms what they always used to tell us," Bill Nash broke in to say, "that people on other planets have been watching 'I Love Lucy' reruns for the past fifty years, assuming they have TV sets out there, which obviously these guys do."

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"Okay, great, they have TV. But why Mouseketeers? Why didn't they turn up dressed as Lucy and Ricky and Ethel and Fred?" There had been a "Lucy" craze shortly before the crew had left for Mars; everybody recognized these allusions.

"Or the Lone Ranger and Tonto, or . . . what were some of the other popular programs in the Fifties?"

Everyone looked at Pat, the only person present who had actually experienced the Fifties. "Christ, I don't remember. That was an awfully long time ago. Well—'Superman.' 'Howdy Doody.' Do you mean shows for children?"

"Any kind. Whatever was on."

Pat felt a little flustered. "There were a lot of westerns besides 'The Lone Ranger,' I think—'Gunsmoke' and 'Wyatt Earp' and, ah, something about a wagon train. Pretty forgettable, most of 'em—at least *I've* obviously forgotten them."

"But you haven't forgotten the Mickey Mouse Club." Jackie clung to her point like the pit bull she could sometimes be. "That might be important. Let's think about that."

In bed that night Pat did think about it. Like the rest of them, she could see that if the tentacled bears had turned up posing as Marshal Dillon and Chester and Doc and Kitty and a pick-up posse, it could mean one kind of thing, and that their turning up as Mouseketeers might very well mean another. They'd been exposed to the full range of network offerings and *chosen* Disney's hyperactive kids and their Troop Leader. Why? What meaning could the chemistry between the Mouseketeers and Jimmie carry to beings who were not human?

Pat knew, fairly clearly, what that chemistry had meant to *her*. When Jimmie and the Mouseketeers invited her each evening to join their family, she had wanted nothing in the world more than to accept—had wanted it so badly that, in a powerful and desperate act of emotional possession, she had *appropriated* them, taken them inside herself. In deepest secrecy she'd sewn a blue pleated skirt, bought a pair of blue socks, turned some old patent-leather pumps into tap shoes by adding black ribbons and metal heel- and toe-protectors. She'd spent her hoarded allowance on a too-tight Mouseketeer turtleneck in the largest size they sold; the thing was still packed away someplace back on Earth, yellower every year but still proclaiming PATSY in inch-high letters to the closed lid of the carton. A large, clumsy girl, she had even lumbered around trying to teach herself to tap-dance. If any human being understood how dressing and acting the part assists the sorcery of possession, Pat (a.k.a. PATSY) Livingston was that human being.

But this was all her private business; nobody else knew a thing about

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it. If anyone at school had found out, she would have felt as embarrassed and ashamed as a boy her age, thirteen, would have felt to be caught wearing his mother's make-up and underwear.

For aliens to respond to a human chemistry of yearning and despair in the same way humans did, they would have to be more like humans than the products of another evolutionary line conceivably could be.

Actually, the *appearance* of response might be more threatening than reassuring. At least Marshal Dillon had packed a six-gun you could *see*.

Pat had given little thought to her Mouseketeer obsession, or the feelings that went with it, for several decades. She was still tossing and kicking the covers around when a light tap came at the door. She rolled out, dragged on her robe, and squinted into the corridor's light. "Hello, Gordon. Not sleeping any better than I am, eh?"

"Mind if I come in?"

Pat stepped back and he shuffled past her, overstuffing her tiny cubicle in the temporary quarters. She snapped on a light and took in his rumpled pajamas, robe, and general wild-eyed demeanor. He met her stare for an instant but his eyes immediately darted away. *Not* a time for tact. "Good God, man, you look terrible!"

"I suppose I do." He rubbed his hand unsteadily over his face; she could hear the scrape of stubble. "Patsy, I wonder if you'd do me a big favor. I wonder if you'd let me come into your bed."

Pat's mouth fell open; so unexpected was this that it took her a few seconds to focus on what he had said. While the thought of sharing her bed with her boss did not exactly repulse her, neither was it an appealing thought. On the other hand, women her age so seldom got propositioned that it seemed only prudent to think twice before turning any offer down. While her thoughts were still groping along these lines Gordon took the wind out of her sails by declaring peevishly, "It's nothing to do with *you*, it's just I've got to hold onto somebody or jump out of my skin, and I don't dare ask any of the others. Wouldn't ask you either, believe me, if I weren't desperate." He glared at Pat in helpless fury. "Can't afford a sedative, got to be up early with all my wits on line. Goddamn it, Patsy—"

"Yes, okay, of course you can, now shut up. Go on, get in. I understand." And she did understand, more or less, or thought she did. Comically enough, she felt both relieved and put out.

Gordon pushed the covers to the foot of the bed and heaved himself in, groaning like a mare in labor. Pat waved out the light and climbed in beside him. There had been no removal of dressing gowns, but Pat held him anyway as best she could through all that bulky fabric. He smelled of sweat and fear, sharp and stale at once. Later she turned her back to Gordon's front and let his heavy arm come around her waist, pulling her against him. He pushed his face into her coarse gray hair. Tremors rocked

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him. "Oh God," he sighed, "I have never, ever been this terrified in my whole misbegotten life."

The vessel touched down on three footpads, kicking up the reddish dust—a lander, not an interstellar ship; that had been left in parking orbit around the planet the previous evening. The staff had set up cameras and viewscreens in the bubble at Campsite One, abandoned since the completion of the Biosphere, the Mouseketeers having first determined via their instruments—obviously better than anything the humans had for the purpose—that the bubble contained no harmful pathogens. Jimmie-scribble claimed not to be able to tell whether or not their own microorganisms might be harmful to the humans; however, he promised they would clean up thoroughly after themselves, and assured Gordon that the bubble's air was breathable.

Once inside, with the airlock sealed, the assembled Biosphere staff watched while fourteen aliens removed their cumbersome pressure suits and assumed their now familiar formation, in their white and gray costumes, with names in English and in scribbles on their shirts. The picture on the large commissary screen was excellent, and now for the first time the humans could get an accurate idea of their size. Pat spotted an alien Karen, a Cubby, a Sharon, a Lonnie . . . she searched for Bobby, her favorite Mouseketeer, for a time her actual pen pal, who had gone on to dance his professional life away on "The Lawrence Welk Show" and later to start a Japanese fast-food chain called "Wunnerful, Wunnerful Suchi." Sure enough, there he was in his usual place in the middle of the back row—Bobby had been even older than Pat's own shamefully great age when he was tapped for the Mouseketeers, and tall. Bobby-scribble looked to be about four and a half feet in height, measured against the struts of the wall behind him. Karen-scribble was tiny.

Strangest of all was the fact that, seen close to, the visitors didn't look a bit like bears. They looked almost laughably like *mice:* gigantic, rather attenuated rodents covered with a nappy gray "fur." At this distance the coiling tentacles even had a whiskery effect, and there was a protuberance like a muzzle. Happily, the proportions were wrong for rats—there was no real question of sharp noses and teeth or shiny shoebutton eyes, let alone long tails—but the overall effect was definitely rodent-like. This (Pat thought irrelevantly) is what Earth may come to in a few million more years, if the rats and cockroaches inherit, after we drop the bomb.

Gordon waited, glassy-eyed, while they formed into their rows. He had slept in the end and so had she, the two of them clinging to one another like babes in the wood.

Jimmie-scribble spoke, his voice much clearer than before. "Hi again,

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Mouseketeers. Thanks for fixing up this meeting. We'd like to talk to the one of you who knows the most about Mickey Mouse Club, if that's okay."

Without indicating how extraordinary it was that any of them knew a single thing about Mickey Mouse Club, Gordon said "Certainly," and Pat found herself in front of the camera lens.

The alien confronted the newcomer and its tentacles writhed. "Mouseketeers' Roll Call, count off now!" it said, and waited.

Pat caught on. She steeled herself, counted to three, and cried "Patsy!"

Instantly she was suffused with embarrassment, but Jimmie-scribble seemed very pleased. "Hi there, Patsy!" (For an eerie moment Pat thought—conferring the personal pronoun without noticing—*He* is *like Jimmie, how can that be?*) "It's wonderful to meet you," said the alien. "My friends and I have come a long way to find out some things we badly need to know, and I'm sure you can help us."

The squeaky, inflectionless voice, and the twisting tentacular motion that appeared to produce it, combined with the perfect colloquial fluency of Jimmie-scribble's English, made Pat feel so queasy she had to lean against the console. "I'll tell you anything I can. And I hope you'll answer some of our questions too."

"We'll sure try. Well, the first thing is that we want very much to talk with Jimmie himself. What's the best way for that to be arranged?"

Gordon would want her to play along, but she had no stomach for lying to a pilgrim on this particular mission. "I'm afraid that's impossible. Jimmie Dodd is dead."

"Dead?" As if the starch had suddenly come out, *this* Jimmie's tentacles all fell straight and limp.

"Yes, long since, and his widow must have died by now as well. A few of the original Mouseketeers might still be living, but they would be about my age—quite old for one of our people. Would you like us to try to find out for you?"

Jimmie had turned to his ranked followers, whose own limp tentacles and asymmetrical postures appeared to exhibit dismay or confusion, and they clicked and mewed among themselves. Now he turned back to the camera. "We'd like to meet some of the kids that knew him, sure. But there must be another leader for the children now. We can talk to *him,* can't we? That might do just about as well." He passed one forelimb, all the same, regretfully over his shirtfront.

Pat gritted her teeth. "Please try to understand. There *is* no Mickey Mouse Club anymore. The show hasn't been on the air for fifty years. There aren't any Mouseketeers left." Gordon was signaling her to shut up; she waved him away. "If there's anything we can do to help put you

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in touch with people who knew Jimmie Dodd, we'll be glad to. But—why did you want to talk with him? Will you tell us that?"

The alien said effortfully, "Jimmie has—had—a great gift for inspiring the young. Our own people need his wisdom badly, we hoped to learn from his example. We wanted him to be our teacher."

At this point Gordon stopped sending signals and simply shoved Pat out of his way. "We'll radio back to Earth and ask them to start trying to locate any of the Mouseketeers that might still be alive, if that's agreeable to you. We can meet again in a few days' time, when we should have more information."

"Okay," said Jimmie-scribble, and it seemed to Pat that his inflectionless voice managed somehow to sound full of grief. Arrangements were agreed to, and soon the Mouseketeers began to pull on their pressure suits, while the Biosphere VII staff fidgeted, eager for the meeting to be concluded so the post-mortem could begin. A voice from the speaker snatched their attention back to the screen. One of the aliens, presumably Jimmie-scribble himself (though it was now impossible to tell, since the suit covered his chest with its blazoned name), was speaking: "And now, Mouseketeers, here's one thing we want you always to remember." He began to sing, a rusty hinge. The others joined him once more in the Hymn which the humans had heard them sing so many times already.

To her own surprise, Pat found herself following instructions and singing along. Singing quite lustily; it was still her song too, it seemed, as much as it was theirs.

"Well," said Gordon, "it looks on the face of it as if Jackie was right on the button." The staff had gathered in the commissary (after a break for essential maintenance chores). They were pretending to brainstorm, but were actually trading impressions, and these were virtually unanimous. Pat had been too involved to notice at the time. Now it surprised and bemused her to learn that the Biosphere personnel, practically to a member, had *liked* the Mouseketeers.

Liked them a lot. The reply had come in from NASA: be careful! don't tell them anything! don't let them know you're undefended! we're on our way!! Pat and her colleagues had been more than a little relieved to see the backs of NASA, when the Sphere's shell had been completed and the Army engineers had left for home. Though the threat was a fairly empty one—since the ship couldn't hope to arrive for several weeks—they received this news with dismay. Pat was positive that *before* meeting the Mouseketeers, some staffers at least would have been grateful to NASA for jumping to their defense, however symbolically; but the whole Sphere seemed instinctively to trust the aliens more than they trusted their own employers.

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Some members of the staff were skeptical about their own feelings, understanding that soothing associations of *Snow White* and *Cinderella, Bambi* and *Dumbo,* might be undermining their common sense as well as their fight-or-flight response, but the skepticism didn't seem to affect the feelings at all.

It wasn't as if the aliens were *cute,* like Disney fawns and bunnies. They were plug-ugly; yet somehow, despite this handicap, they inspired trust.

Astonishing that they *all* felt that way. Pat doubted if there was a single other important issue, aside from the Biosphere itself, that every one of them shared the same feelings and beliefs about.

"Several of the original Mouseketeers have been located," Gordon reported, "Annette Funicello—even I remember her—and a couple of others, Patsy here would recognize their names. They're going to set up video interviews between them and the visitors, but Christ, they're all in their sixties, they're not going to look much like the kids on the show anymore."

"I get the impression," Pat remarked, "that the visitors aren't interested in the kids for their own sake—just as witnesses to the Jimmie Dodd phenomenon. Gordon, there's one more thing you could do. I had a book once, just a cheap paperback, written by some guy who'd fallen in love with Annette from afar when he was about twelve, and who later became terribly cynical about everything and decided to expose the unpleasantness that had gone on behind the scenes on the Mickey Mouse Club set, while the show was still in production. So he interviewed a lot of ex-Mouseketeers and Disney employees—this was in the Seventies, I think, Disney and Jimmie were both dead by then—and even *he* couldn't find anybody who would say a word against Jimmie Dodd, whatever they said about Disney himself or the others or how the studio kept pushing Annette even though Darlene had a lot more talent. The visitors might like to have that read to them. I can't remember the title or the author but the Library of Congress computers should have that book indexed under Disney or Mickey Mouse or something. Worth a try?"

"I'll get right on it." Since that morning's conversation with the aliens in the bubble, Gordon's terror had dissipated. He had told Pat just before calling the meeting to order that he felt certain the visitors were honest and had no intention of harming the Biosphere personnel or the people of Earth. Like the rest, what's more, he seemed not to care whether or not they were even *capable* of doing harm.

That was an attitude NASA wasn't going to like. It was then that she realized the Sphere had in some mysterious way come to side emotionally with the alien visitors *against* NASA. How had that happened? Pat had no idea; and yet it felt to her that trusting their good intentions was as

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inevitable and natural for her colleagues in the Biosphere as trusting Jimmie Dodd's had been for her when she was thirteen years old.

"When do we meet with the visitors again?" somebody asked, sounding excited and eager.

"Day after tomorrow. We rig the bubble with a videophone, for the conversations with the ex-Mouseketeers, and we stand by round the clock to receive instructions from home. In the meantime I suggest we do a couple of other things. One, pay attention to our business here; we're falling seriously behind schedule. And two"—he waved at the large screen at one end of the commissary—"watch a few reels of Mickey Mouse Club when you get a chance. We're recording a batch of them right now."

"Are we going to talk to the visitors again, before the next meeting?"

"Not unless *they* call *us*. We could broadcast on a wide band and hope they'd pick us up, but we don't know where they are. Somewhere on the surface of Mars, most likely. Any special reason?"

"Not exactly," said the speaker, Andrea Peabody, an aquaculturist, "but in case they overheard our conversations with Houston, I just thought . . ."

"Hm." Gordon looked unhappy. None of them had considered that. We're terrible strategists, thought Pat. Maybe we decided to trust the aliens because we were so poorly equipped to *dis*trust them, to think like soldiers or police. Gordon himself was certainly no exception. He shrugged: "Well, really, it couldn't strike them as so very strange that we would notify our superiors of their presence and their request." He sounded defensive. That was Gordon all over. He always got defensive whenever he couldn't see which way to jump.

"I wasn't thinking of us, of what *we* said," Andrea answered, "I was thinking about what NASA said."

"Listen, Gordon," said Jackie, "anything we broadcast, Houston's going to hear it." From the expressions on the faces around her as everyone took this in, it looked to Pat as if they were also taking in for the first time what she had realized already: that their wish to protect the aliens could look treasonous to the folks back home, some of whom were paying their salaries.

There was nothing unreasonable about NASA's point of view. The West had just spent a huge fortune setting up the Biosphere. If the Mouseketeers got rid of the staff, here was a comfy home from home, free for the taking and, incidentally, a base from which to threaten Earth.

On the other hand, why *mightn't* they be sincere?

The jungle biome was essentially finished; Pat was able to start screening the Mickey Mouse Club tapes as soon as they were ready, and settled into her seat aware of being keenly eager to reacquaint herself with

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those icons of her distant early adolescence. When the musical cartoon intro began—a march version of the Mouseketeer Hymn, beautifully drawn and charmingly sung—her mouth widened into a huge grin and her eyes actually filled up; she hadn't heard that tune in thirty years, not since a TV retrospective back in the Eighties.

The first quarter-hour segment of the show featured a hand puppet called Sooty, wildly agitated by an Englishman. No amount of love could make a performance Pat had found dull and dumb at age thirteen less than extremely tedious now, though she conceded that the puppet might work well enough with very small children. The sequence was interrupted several times for commercials (NASA's tapes had preserved those): Peter Pan peanut butter, Mattel toys, Davy Crockett coonskin caps, Ipana toothpaste (with Bucky Beaver). The commercials were better entertainment than Sooty, but Pat was eager for the Mouseketeers.

At last a curtain parted and a group of cavorting children loomed on the screen. Pat's heart turned over; she slid down in her seat, arms folded, legs stuck out straight. How really wonderful it had been, what a heavenly gift for an unhappy child, to make and don that costume, to work at mastering those dance steps—how painfully!—until able at last to do the very routine (a simple softshoe turn) the Mouseketeers were performing now, working their way up to the Roll Call.

And now, oh joy! the Roll Call itself, the short feisty parade of the world's luckiest children and their two grown-up guardians: Cubby! Karen! Tommy! Sharon! Mike! Doreen! Mark! Darlene! Lonnie! Nancy! Bobby! Annette! Roy!—

Jimmie!

Pat sat through the segment in a daze of nostalgic bliss. It was a Monday: Fun With Music Day. Jimmie was teaching the Mouseketeers to play little baritone-ukelele Mousegetars just like his big one. Pat remembered that particular number very well, having hummed the tune to herself often, later on in college while teaching herself to play the guitar.

There followed an episode of "Spin and Marty," about some boys at a dude ranch/summer camp, a classic Disney tale featuring a rich but lonely and poorly socialized boy, a parent substitute (his bunkhouse counselor), and an extended "family" of camper peers—a mirror of the Mouseketeers and Jimmie, and extremely popular when it first aired. Then came a (not very entertaining) "Mousekartoon." Finally, just before the Mouseketeer Hymn, Jimmie appeared by himself before the camera to preach one of his little sermonettes, called "Doddisms," that Pat had loved and clung to and copied down every evening for a whole year, to the intense irritation of her parents, who had sensed that Jimmie was an antidote for some family sin of omission.

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Other staff members had joined Pat in the room, but she sat scarcely aware of them, rapt before the image of this person who radiated warmth and sincerity like a Franklin stove, who should have been ridiculous—a middle-aged man in Mickey Mouse ears!—but was not. She knew. She had met him twice. In person he had been just as warm, just as simple.

Not until Pat came out of her daze at the end of the Hymn did she begin to take in the reactions of her colleages, who were seeing all this for the first time.

"My God, I don't believe it!" came from a seat somewhere behind her. "I don't believe they crossed maybe ninety light-years of space for *that,* I just do not."

"That's got to be *the* most revoltingly saccharine bunch of hokum I ever heard in my life," another stated flatly.

" 'Little drops of water,' quoted the first speaker, Ron Abbado, from Engineering. " 'Little grains of sand. Little deeds of kindness. Little words of love.' " He made upchucking noises.

Between astonishment and outrage Pat swiveled around in her seat and stared at them. "You really hated it that much? What's so all-fired revolting about love and kindness?"

Ron stared back. There was an awkward silence, during which he visibly remembered Pat's status and pulled himself up short. "Well, okay, you watched this stuff when you were just a kid, that's one thing. But come on—you have to admit it's a little much to swallow *now!*"

"Exactly what do you mean by 'a little much.' "

Ron squirmed uneasily, but stuck to his guns. "Oh, *come* on, Pat! You just don't *talk* to kids about stuff like that anymore."

"He's right," Johnny Chua chimed in. "It's too hopeless."

"Hell, I doubt there's been a kid born in forty years that wouldn't throw up if some guy with his *name* on his shirt tried to tell him he ought to do a good deed every day," said Harry Carlson, the Field Crops staffer.

"Meaning you babies, I suppose." Apart from Gordon, Pat was the oldest person on Mars by a factor of twenty years at least. "What about Mr. Rogers, Johnny? I'll bet *you* remember him—did he seem 'hopeless' too?"

"Sure, I remember Mr. Rogers," said Johnny mildly. "He made you feel good about *yourself.* This guy thinks kids should be little saints or something."

" 'Always remember, Mouseketeers, that the most important things are the little deeds of kindness, the little words of love,' " Ron repeated boldly, rolling his eyes heavenward. Then, catching sight of her expression, "Aw, come *on,* Pat, don't get huffy. Things were different back then, we know that. But you have to admit, it's one thing for you to have thought this was a pretty terrific show when you were young, and another

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thing for a lot of grown-up aliens to turn it into a cult, and get into a space ship and travel to another solar system just to consult with Jimmie, like he was some kind of cosmic guru."

Actually, she did have to admit it. At thirteen, Pat would have walked barefoot across the whole breadth of America to talk with Jimmie Dodd; but would she have come to Mars to see him, as a busy adult with a career to build? Would she have consulted him about philosophical or practical problems, ever?

Not bloody likely.

And did that make the visitors a species of spacefaring children, or religious nuts? What lay behind their pilgrimage? What was it about Mickey Mouse Club and its late leader that had brought them to the solar system system *really?*

Problems with their own children, Jimmie-scribble had implied. It was a hell of a long way to come for advice.

Viewing the tapes had thrown the Biosphere staff into confusion. Those who had trusted the visitors instinctively were now faced with a choice of regarding them either as liars or as imbeciles; it no longer quite seemed possible to take them at their word.

Nevertheless, the videophones were set up in the bubble by robot remotes, and the scheduled conversations between the ex-Mouseketeers and the Scribbles took place.

Afterwards it was the Sphere's turn. The NASA ship still lay two weeks off Mars; a situation as confusing as it was inescapable still had to be dealt with. Orders from Houston were clear about what should *not* be done; what actually was to be done had to be left in large part to the judgment of the people on the scene.

That day, when the screen resolved into the image of Jimmie-scribble and his shipmates, they were not in Mouseketeer costume.

Gordon got front and center, nervously clearing his throat. "Were the interviews satisfactory? Did you find out what you wanted to know?"

"We did, in a way," one of them replied—probably Jimmie-scribble; there had been no conclusive sign so far that any of the other Mouseketeers could speak any English, apart from the barely comprehensible English of the Hymn. "We talked with Annette and Tommy and Doreen. They told us that Jimmie was a wonderful person, very kind, very religious, very loving. That's what we expected to hear, of course; but we heard some unexpected things too."

Gordon blinked. "Such as?"

"That the real Mouseketeers, the children who knew Jimmie personally when they were young—many of them weren't affected much by having known him and been close to him. Later on, some of those kids

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went through some pretty bad times. Drugs. Drinking. Wild behavior. Suicide attempts." His tentacles coiled into tight knots, then burst open. "Unkindness," he creaked, as if that said it all.

At a loss, Gordon looked desperately at Pat, who stood up and stepped in front of the lens. "I'd like to ask a question, if I may. Why aren't you wearing your Mouseketeer uniforms today?"

Again the tightly scrunched tentacles uncoiled with a snap. "Because we've been watching television," the alien said, "and we already knew our coming here was a mistake, even before talking with Annette, Tommy, and Doreen."

Gordon and Pat exchanged a look. After a minute Gordon said, "Because of television?"

"Right. We couldn't pick up a picture while we were traveling, but these past few days we've had nothing much to do except watch television. TV is our window into your world. We found Jimmie by looking through that window." His body made an all-over wriggling movement they hadn't seen before—meaning what? "There's nobody like Jimmie on TV now."

"When you say 'like Jimmie,' " Pat asked cautiously, "what exactly does that mean? What were you looking *for?"*

The alien wriggled again, and shamed her by declaring: "Patsy, you of all people know what it means." He paused to let the truth of this be felt, then added: "We heard three or four different preachers say some of the same things Jimmie used to say, but none of them had Jimmie's—" he emitted a chittering squawk, a startled-chicken sound. "You folks haven't got that word," said Jimmie-scribble. "I guess we should have asked ourselves whether people who have no name for something were very likely to have much of the thing, either—but you had Jimmie himself, and that fooled us."

"What thing? Give us a rough idea, can't you?"

"Well—" he paused, tentacles rooting in his fur "—when people hear you speak, your [chitter-*squawk*] tells them whether you mean what you say. I can tell you one thing: these preachers of yours haven't got any at all." Abruptly the alien swayed and his tentacles twined sluggishly, as if he were drunk or confused—a large white mouse trapped in a disorientation experiment. "Jimmie had a tremendous amount of [chitter-*squawk*]," he managed to scrape out.

Pat's mind did a slow glissade. It finally seemed easiest simply to say, "I know that."

"All those politicians making speeches—how do they expect anybody to vote for them? How can the people not *see* how untruthful they are?"

Pat remained thoughtfully silent. Gordon said stiffly, "We haven't got that knack. There's no way for us to be sure."

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"Any more than you can be sure that *I've* been telling you the truth."

"No." Though in fact the whole Sphere had responded to the sense of his truthfulness.

"Or that Jimmie did."

"No," said Gordon. Pat let it pass. *She* had known what Jimmie was, but only as a desperately needy child. None of the Sphere staff, all adults, had been able to perceive in Jimmie what nearly all of them had sensed in his alien namesake.

Now this alien said: "A little while ago Tommy told us, 'Jimmie was the most wonderful man I ever met. I'm sure I'll never meet anybody like him again. They don't make people like him anymore. If you just met him you might think nobody could be that nice or that sweet, but Jimmie really was.' We were struck by what he said, that when people met Jimmie they weren't able to see that he was a valuable person, a very wise, kind man."

Pat opened her mouth to protest, but Gordon said, sweating, "It's all true, everything you say is true. We generally fail to recognize our saints. Sometimes we have a lot of trouble telling the difference between a monster and a savior—and if Jimmie Dodd was some kind of special person, we weren't equipped to see it, we're just not made that way! What do you expect of us? We can't *help* it if we can't read souls, or whatever it is you people do."

"To us," Jimmie-scribble's tentacles screeched, "the most terrible thing is realizing that even the children who *did* read Jimmie's soul were no better off than kids who never got the chance." He shuddered briefly, and behind him Pat saw Tommy-scribble shudder with him. "*Our* young people, our children—each of them has to live through a terrible time, before settling down to become like us. And lately, for reasons we don't understand, this bad time has been lasting longer and longer, and getting worse and worse. We've been just about desperate . . . mobs of our kids go roaming around together, wrecking, burning, fighting each other . . . they outgrow it, finally, but they do so much damage in the meantime."

"They sound like berserkers," Pat said in an interested voice, "young Vikings so violent that they had to be sent into battle for the good of society. Isn't there someplace to direct all that aggressiveness, where they can't do any harm?"

Jimmie-scribble's tentacles twined around themselves; his body rocked and swayed. "That aggressiveness always does harm! Many thousands of them are out of control—no safe drugs to give them, far too many of them to lock up. No, the only thing that ever works—that ever *has* worked—is to fix their attention, *before* they enter the violent time, on what Jimmie would call 'the little deeds of kindness.' Living well with

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other people, building things not destroying them, keeping things together—"

Pat believed she saw the light. "And you thought a people that had produced a Jimmie Dodd could tell you how to do that more effectively."

The alien's rocking had gradually slowed, and now he stood like a stone. "What we thought was that Jimmie himself could show us how to fix their attention on kind actions. We even hoped that he might be willing to come home with us himself for a while. But we arrived to find him dead and forgotten, and the children he knew best no better fitted for life than those who never knew him at all. And on television, nothing but preachers, criminals, and greedy players of games. It was a wasted trip."

"Look here," Pat said with some asperity, "you're hardly being sensible or fair. You mentioned Tommy—what about him? What about Karen or Jay-Jay or Cheryl, or lots of the others? *They* weren't self-destructive teenagers! And I can tell you for sure that Jimmie's teachings fixed *my* attention, because he changed my life, and he *saturated* my early adolescence, and there must have been plenty of other kids like me. Maybe it wasn't a perfect cure, but what cure is?"

No words emerged, but Jimmie-scribble's tentacles coiled and coiled, as though a human's lips were moving silently.

"My colleagues have been telling me kids nowadays aren't like they used to be when I was young, and maybe that's true," said Pat. "TV is different, that's for sure. But I think you people have had the right idea all along, without knowing it. I think you ought to go on home and produce your own TV show—like ours, part entertainment and part message, but adapted for your own youngsters. Kids of my generation—a lot of them—did recognize what Jimmie was, even if their parents didn't. *All* of yours will know. All you have to do is get the most genuine person you can find to be the Jimmie, and let him put the message over. Maybe you won't get them all, but a lot of them ought to go for it, if they can really tell you mean it for *their* good, not just to keep them from being a nuisance. That's how Jimmie did it, really. He couldn't give you any better advice if he were here himself."

By the time this mini-lecture had wound down, the subordinate Scribbles had broken formation and were tangling tentacles with one another, perhaps arguing, perhaps exclaiming. Pat didn't know which and didn't much care. "See," she said, "we have a tradition here. A saint appears among us. As Gordon told you, he's ignored, or mistaken for a monster and killed. But somebody else—often enough it's a foreigner—understands the real situation and *takes over* for the dead saint. And so his message isn't lost, because the one who recognized him carries it to a different place, where the people may need it more, and be more willing to listen."

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Jimmie-scribble's tentacles coiled smoothly upon themselves. All his attention was fixed on Pat.

"Incidentally, the skirts and pants are supposed to be blue. The socks too."

The alien said, "But *you* should come and be the Jimmie—come and show us how it's done."

The suggestion caught Pat flat-footed. Her mouth opened in protest, but she closed it again, looking thoughtful. After a moment she said, "How could I?"

"We fixed up a place for Jimmie on the ship, in case he agreed to go back with us—you could live there. You won't get sick; we've been running some tests. Will you do that, Patsy? Come in Jimmie's place, and bring his message to the foreigners?"

Three nights later Pat lay awake aboard the Mouseketeer vessel, in a cubicle just the size of her room in the biosphere. The ship had broken out of parking orbit the day before, and by now was well on its way out of the solar system. She lay on a bed copied roughly from a television sitcom—"I Love Lucy," very likely—with sheets soft and thick as flannel and a thick gray blanket. The bed was too short; she lay across it diagonally and regarded the pale, faintly glowing walls and ceiling with vast contentment, having been fed and fussed over by the homely gray aliens and then, at her request, left to herself.

There was artificial gravity; Pat felt somewhat heavier than Mars-normal, though nothing like as heavy as she would have felt on Earth.

She expected never to see Earth again. Every time she thought of this it surprised her how very little she minded; yet the explanation wasn't far to seek. Her one marriage had ended in divorce so many years before that memories of life with her former husband rang as flat as a cracked goblet. She had no children, and those of her friends who were still alive were thinly scattered over three continents. Here at the brink of retirement from a life filled up with work and little else, what in God's name would she do with herself back on Earth? What use would she be? A little consulting work now and then and eight holes of golf before lunch? The prospect loomed so dismally that she had largely refused to look at it at all.

Why in the world *not* go where no human had ever gone before? Why not carry the Gospel of Jimmie Dodd to the young alien "berserkers," on the off-chance it was really what they needed?

Gordon thought her mad and had done his best to dissuade her, but since Pat's contract had expired weeks ago there was no legal way. (NASA would have found some way, legal or otherwise, had they managed to arrive in time; but they hadn't, and the alien ship outclassed their own

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ships to a degree that made pursuit quite pointless.) "You're too *old* to go gallivanting off alone like this!" Gordon had finally shouted. "It's ridiculous, it's absurd! You'll never get back alive!" And though they had promised to bring her home soon, Pat figured Gordon was probably right about that. But what did it matter? In her own view she was too old *not* to go. Let Gordon see how he felt about it in another ten years or so, when the time came for *him* to be put out to pasture.

Besides, the thought of being useful, even heroic, at her age was irresistible. The thought of the enduring earthly fame she had vouchsafed for herself, by becoming the first human visitor to another star, while less important, was still quite satisfying to contemplate. Pat had always enjoyed being famous.

And the idea of being genuine Mouseketeer Patsy at last was perfectly delicious. She even remembered all the dances.

Full of satisfaction, Pat hummed the song about how to play the guitar into the semi-darkness of her cubicle and thought about the last time she'd seen Jimmie Dodd alive. It was two years before his death. He'd come to her home town on a publicity tour, and she had ridden up from college on the Greyhound bus one day to meet him for lunch. He had burst through the doors of his hotel, coatless on that cold morning, skin flushed, red hair crackling, carrying his Mousegetar and ears in one hand—he'd come to their meeting straight from the Children's Hospital—the other arm reaching for Pat. Just like that, her senior-year sophistication had turned to ash in the face of some more fundamental truth. She had looked at the figure flying toward her—across the lobby, out of the world—and *I did know him,* she told herself, *I did see him, I saw Jimmie that day as well as any Scribble ever did—I got what I'd come for. So maybe they did too.* ●

—for Gregory Benford and Gordon Eklund

HEAT DEATH OF THE UNIVERSE

I

It all
Comes back to this
The place without a spark
Where heat and hope are worth the same:
Nothing.

—Martha Soukup

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Jack McDevitt's most recent novel, *A Talent for War*, was published by Ace Books in February and will be a July offering from the Science Fiction Book Club. After nearly a year's absence, Mr. McDevitt returns to our pages with a tale which illuminates just why we might find humanity differing from an alien culture in some fundamental way.

LEAP OF FAITH

by Jack McDevitt

art: Anthony Bar

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Behind him, in the dark, something scrabbled across the flagstones.

Father Seidel swung his lantern around, hoping perhaps to find Chance or some other member of the party. But he was alone in the ancient courtyard.

I want to know how it happened that a civilization could live millions of years, and never know Him.

He sighed. How does one answer such a question? Theologians had pored over the Marikaifan records, had read their plodding histories. No swift rise and fall of empire here. Their utilitarian philosophies were, like the cities, grounded in rationalist bedrock. There was no hint of His existence, no sign that He had ever shown His face to them.

Again, the sound. Cartilage on sandstone. Scratchy. Hard. Sharp.

Perhaps he should have listened to Chance and stayed with the others. But he needed to be alone among the Cyclopean stones if he was to understand, to penetrate, the minds of the Marikaifa.

He backed against a wall, and extinguished the lantern. Absolute night closed in, the dark night of the soul. His breathing grew loud. There was no sky here: no moon circled Marikai, no stars penetrated the dust and gas of the Horsehead, no planets floated within visual range. *It's the reason they never got off this world,* Chance had said. *There was no place to go. Despite the fact they had millions of years, there was simply no place to go. A space shot could be nothing more than a leap into the dark.*

Father Seidel considered calling out, but held his tongue. He told himself he did not want the others to laugh at him, lost and frightened so easily. But he trembled at the possibility that he would draw the attention of something else.

Nonsense.

He strove to put his fears away. He could not complete his mission if he was distracted by childish terrors.

We have lost people. There are indigenous life forms.

He drew his fingers along the wall: it was rough-hewn, solid, designed to defy time. As it had. The product of a race that had ruled this world for thirty thousand centuries. That had achieved a technology in some ways exceeding Earth's own. The Marikaifa had never known war.

Most significant, they had never bent the knee to any god.

He thumbed the switch on the lantern and sent a flood of yellow light across the courtyard. Tough grass and bushes pushed up among the broken stones. A flat slab that had been a tabletop lay at his feet. Had children once played here? (He'd seen the pictures: Loose-jointed children far taller than he, with enormous eyes, and long thin faces that lent an eternally quizzical expression to the young, and a passive innocence to the adults.)

The wind blew cold, rattling the branches of the trees along the outer

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wall. There was a taste of snow in the air. At the far end of the courtyard, a short stairway mounted to an arch. He hurried along the wall, keeping his back to it, and started up. Stairs were always a problem here: the Marikaifa had been almost twice the height of a tall man, a description which in no way fit Father Seidel. The slabs from which they were constructed were, for the most part, quite high and wide. Getting up even a few of them required an arduous effort from a middle-aged man whose only preoccupations had been of a scholarly nature. He would have preferred to maintain a discreet silence, but lifting his weight from one level to the next demanded an occasional grunt.

He counted eight blocks, and his shins and knees ached with the effort when he pulled himself at last over the top. A long gallery lay ahead, buried with rubble from a fallen roof. A row of short, heavy columns, which had once supported the roof, stood broken and crumbling amid the debris.

Three million years of civilization, and they'd passed from existence without leaving so much as a legend, until a routine survey had seen cities in the desert.

He sat down, and played the beam back the way he'd come. The courtyard lay empty. Beyond it, no light moved through the excavations, nor among the mammoth, blockish buildings that so thoroughly reflected their creators' lack of imagination.

Scholars back home prided themselves on knowing everything about this oldest race. They'd been frenetic record keepers, and while it had taken the experts some time to decipher their language and figure out their technology, we had it now, and much had survived.

No wars. That had been the shocker. Even during their periods of political disintegration. Violence and theft seen as aberrations. *And yet they'd never received His word.*

Scratch.

He stopped.

Silence. Ahead of him this time. Somewhere among the columns.

He threw the light along the gallery. Nothing. Nothing he could see.

The city possessed a sterile, prosaic geometry that the Calvinists of another day, and the Araproctors of his own, would have approved: long flat buildings, no curved lines, few windows. The glass long gone, of course.

He walked well wide of the columns, carefully playing the beam in all directions. Walls rose around him.

No astronomy. The Marikaifa had no stars to which they could raise their eyes, and so they had never discovered the queen of sciences. Unconfused by a multitude of celestial motions, they seemed to recognize quite early the orbital relationship between the sun and their world.

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Crunch.

Directly ahead. Around the corner. Something was waiting for him around the corner.

Seidel crouched against a wall. Sweat ran down into his collar. Damned fool, wandering off. They wouldn't even have noticed yet he was missing, not with all those people.

Just trees and wind. Everything magnified in the dark.

His knees locked, and he pushed himself forward, past a doorway. The door itself, or what remained of it, lay in the entry. It appeared to have been organic. Some variety of wood.

A long passageway opened beyond it.

A few flakes of snow drifted down. He looked up: the beam caught a bright red eye, venomous and intelligent. It was buried within a dark quivering mass perched on the edge of the roof. Their glances caught, and locked. Somehow, in a way he could not understand, the thing smiled at him.

He bolted into the passageway, springing over the decayed door, and ran down the stone corridor. It was strewn with loose rocks and chips. He slipped on the rubble and bounced off a wall, went down, scrambled to his feet and kept running. Never looked back. Left at the first turn and right at the next. Up to the next level. Quicker this time than last, leaping from one slab to another. Down a long passageway and into a room that had a working door. He pushed it shut, damning the creaking hinges. Afterward, he could find no bolt.

There was an exit opposite if he needed it. The room was full of collapsed furniture and assorted rubble. The decay of a half million years. Chance had said that the dry climate had preserved much of Bal-Ihuaya. That was the Marikaifan name for the city, or at least as close to it as English could get. When its original inhabitants had lived here, the city had stood on a plain near an inland sea. It was all desert now. Had been for a long time.

But parts of Bal-Ihuaya were incredibly old. The Marikaifa had lived here two and a half million years. What city anywhere, anywhere among the eight known races, could match that?

Killed ultimately by a solar flare.

Crouching in the dark, Seidel tried to quiet his breathing. He listened for sounds outside, and wondered whether the thing could creep up on him without his hearing it.

Maybe it wasn't dangerous. It was ugly, but that didn't mean it would attack a *man*.

He concentrated on his mission, and on the end of the Marikaifa. They'd achieved quite early the stable social system which still eludes everybody else, and they'd apparently survived happily for eons. But eventually an

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eruption on their sun had disrupted communications on a planetary scale, and started a chain of events that culminated in a financial collapse. Their stability, it turned out, had been bought at the cost of a rigidity that would not permit recovery from disaster. The Marikaifa had struggled for a time, and descended into barbarism. A few, evolved beyond recognition, still wandered the less hostile portions of the globe. But they had no memory of their history.

Too old, Toynbee would have said. Cultures are like people. They age, and die. When they're ready, it doesn't take much. For the Romans, it was a matter of too much lead in their pots. For the Marikaifa, a brief excess of sunlight.

He sensed, rather than heard, movement.

In the corridor.

Seidel's pulse beat furiously. He pressed at the lantern switch. It clicked audibly; the beam snapped on. He pushed to his feet, hurried through an anteroom, and out into another passageway. He was a few steps away when he heard the door burst open. A sound like dry leaves blowing across concrete. And the distant sigh of a dying wind.

Fighting panic, Seidel climbed higher in the building, raced the length of a corridor, turned, up another level, dashed through rooms half-filled with sand. He heard it below, snuffling and scratching, claws occasionally frantic in the rubble. There was no doubting its intent now.

Seidel knew there were nocturnal hunters here, creatures that followed the long night across the continent (which, in northern latitudes, circled the globe). Most were not dangerous.

He needed a window. Needed to get out, find help. But the Marikaifa hadn't liked windows, and every door seemed to open onto another passageway or gallery. He stumbled into a series of connected rooms, but found no exit. Ran back the way he'd come, near blind with panic. He exploded through the doorway, something thin and supple wrapped round his thigh, cut through his trousers and sliced the flesh. He screamed. His stomach heaved, and he brought the lantern down on the thing that held him. Again.

It shrieked, and tightened its grip.

In the shuddering light, he glimpsed the thing, black and glistening and sickly wet, long rubbery limbs floating slowly toward him. Seidel whimpered and hit it again. The lens shattered, and the light went out, and he drove the ruined lantern into it. The thing quivered and whipped into a spasm.

He broke free, and fled down the black corridor, one hand thrust in front of his face, the other held straight out. The floor vanished beneath him, and he flailed for a grip, found one, and dragged himself back. Staircase. Up. He didn't want the thing above him.

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He got up two or three slabs and stopped to listen. Nothing. Maybe it would leave. He prayed it would. Prayed as hard as he'd ever prayed for anything. He needed to get outside, scream for Chance, hell with his dignity. He climbed painfully. One foot up, push, drag the other. Everything hurt. Eight levels to a landing, then turn and eight more to the next floor.

Below him, the thing was coming again.

He had no chance in the dark.

It started up the stairwell.

Seidel raced down a passageway, protecting himself as best he could, trailing one hand along the wall. Found an opening. With a door. He stopped, felt for a bolt. Yes!

He tested the door. Pulled on it. It creaked. Moved. It was heavy, but it moved. Weighted plastic of some sort. He got behind it, pushed on it, kicked sand and stone out of the way. Slow. It took all his weight, and everything his adrenalin could pour into the effort. Hurry. Scuttling rats' feet coming out of the stairwell. Shoved it shut. Bad fit. Bolt won't go. Get it open, try again. The thing was coming fast. Must be able to see. Maybe some kind of radar system.

It was in the passageway.

He screamed, struggled with the bolt. It resisted, wouldn't move. Hammered it with the broken lantern. Heard it slide home.

He felt pressure against the door.

The thing scratched, breathed, whispered. Whined.

The door held.

Seidel staggered back, to the farthest corner, thinking: no time for panic. Got to find out if there's another way in. Or out. He realized at the same moment there was cold air in the room.

He felt his way around the walls. Found the window directly opposite the door. No other exit.

He leaned out into the dark, hoping to find some light somewhere, some texture of movement. But there was nothing. The wind shook trees he could not see.

The thing threw itself against the door.

Again.

The door shook. But it sounded solid. Secure.

My God, what would he not have traded for the light from a single star! *Any space flight from Marikai would be a leap into the dark.* Father Seidel understood now what that meant. No wonder the poor bastards never got off the surface.

The noise at the door subsided. Stopped.

He settled down to wait for dawn. And realized that sunrise was three weeks away.

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He was still holding the battered lantern. The switch had broken loose and slid without resistance in its seating. He tried taking it apart, but working in the dark was hopeless. In the end, he dropped it out the window and listened. His heart pounded.

The lantern crashed through some branches.

Moments later, it shattered on a hard surface.

The door was quiet. He sat a long time, thinking it over, knowing all along it was waiting for him on the other side. He could *feel* it, crouching, waiting for him, knowing he would have to come out.

Seidel stood near the window, measuring his courage, knowing that he had no choice. He waited a long time, an hour, maybe two, and then he raised himself onto the sill, and swung his feet out.

Eventually, when he was ready, he murmured, "Into Thy hands, O Lord," and jumped.

He went home with a broken leg, a broken ankle, bruised ribs, and a dislocated shoulder. Chance's people found him in the tree about half an hour after his leap. They reprimanded him severely, and informed his order that he would not be welcome again at the site.

He also went home with no answer for the bishop. He had no idea why God had hidden His face from a people so gentle, so good. "Maybe," he suggested, having nothing else to say, "it was a test. The Marikaifa seem to have functioned on a higher moral plane than the rest of us. Maybe He wanted to challenge them. If so, I think they failed." Outside the window, the constellations were bright and friendly.

"Because they never found Him," added the bishop.

"Because they never *tried*. They died on their home world. All their success was wiped out by a single mischance. Whatever else may be true of us, *we* won't go down that easily."

"And what would you have had them do, Eric?"

"Go out to look for Him. Chase Him across the firmament, as we have. I think there's more to it than just not having been able to see the stars." Seidel smiled sadly. "It's not so much a sky they lacked. No: it was something more significant, closer to the bone. Do you know what I was thinking about when I went out that window? Into the dark?"

The bishop shook his head, smiling. "Only that you must have been afraid."

"That too. But I jumped anyway. As *you* would have. But what kept running through my head, maybe what loosened my fingers when I wanted to hang on, was what I'd realized about the Marikaifa."

"I don't think I understand."

"If I'd been one of *them*," Seidel said, looking from the bishop to the stars outside the window, "I'd still be sitting in that room." ●

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THE GOAT MAN

by Peni R. Griffin

Peni R. Griffin is the second Texan author in this issue whose story marks a first-time appearance in *IAsfm.* Ms. Griffin has also sold stories to *Twilight Zone* and a number of small press magazines. The following tale is set outside of San Angelo, the West Texas town where she lived for eight years and where she first heard of "The Goat Man."

art: Janet Aulisio

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They took a small detour—ten or fifteen miles—on the way to the Senior Sunday School Fourth of July picnic, winding up at a truck turnaround in a stand of mesquite. "Where are we?" asked Janice, climbing up into the open window. Her shirt was tied up under her breasts, and she could feel Graham looking at her pale, flat midriff and bare legs.

"Somebody's ranch," said Graham, muffled by the Pinto's shell. He tugged on her foot. "Come back."

"It's nicer out here," said Janice; which was true, as far as it went. The tingly excitement of being watched was pleasant, and she was in no hurry; a state she was trying to teach Graham to respect. She looked around, ignoring the way the steady West Texas wind blew strands of blonde hair into her eyes. The vast chattering of the locusts surrounded her like the sunlight and the bare blue sky. Far away a bulwark of earth rose, cutting short the horizon. "All that driving, and we're still not so far from town. I can see the dam."

"And I can see your bellybutton," said Graham, contorting himself over the gear shift to tickle her. Janice squealed, caught the door before her balance failed, and fought playfully (her resistance impaired by giggles) against being dragged inside. At some point in the struggle her glasses fell off, and aided by this distraction he soon had her pinned in a good tickling position. Janice began to howl. "Stop that! Graham, I mean it! You're hurting my stomach."

"Pay toll."

She kissed him, and they began what they had come for. Despite the dryness of the air, the vinyl seats became sloppy with sweat. The locusts continued to chatter mindlessly, and a jackrabbit lolloped by, undisturbed by the silent car; until a sharp "Stop that!" cut across the background buzz, and he shot away into the prickly pear.

"Oh, Jan, come on."

"I said, stop it! How many times have I told you?"

"And told me and told me and told me. Why are you such a tease?"

"I'm not. Right up front in the beginning I told you where I drew the line."

"You said it might move someday."

"You've tried to move it every single time we've made out! What's wrong with my hands?"

"What's wrong with the rest of you? You frigid or something?"

"Look. I just don't want to do that with you, now or in the foreseeable future. Where's my glasses?"

"Why not?"

"I just don't; and I never will if you keep pushing me."

"Never? Come on, girl!"

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"Come on where? Did it ever occur to you that you just might not be the one I want to lose my virginity to? I can only lose it once, you know."

"If you didn't like me, why'd you keep going out with me?"

"Oh, for crying out loud." Her head was light, and she could hear her voice getting shrill and argumentative. Deliberately she reined herself in. It is the woman's duty, in these situations, to represent the voice of reason, no matter what. Kissing his frown did not alter it. "Why don't we finish real quick and get on to the picnic? I'm starting to get wobbly."

"You would. You always get wobbly when things don't suit you."

Janice sighed. "I can't help what my insulin does, Graham. It's not desperate or anything, but I ought to eat pretty soon."

"We'll leave when I'm ready."

"Okay—"

"And I won't be ready till I get what I want."

"For God's sake, Graham!"

"I'm serious. We've been dating six months. I've driven you all over this boring little town. I've taken you to concerts in other boring little towns. I've taken you to nice restaurants. I even took you to that stupid play. And what do I get for it? Nothing. A little grope, just enough to get started, and then 'Oh, I'm hungry now, my blood sugar's gonna make me faint, let's go home.' I'm sick of it."

"If you wanted a whore why didn't you go looking for one?"

"Don't you shout at me, girl."

"I'm not shouting. I'm speaking loudly and if you want to hear shouting you just keep this up."

"Keep it up? You do everything you can to keep it down. I might as well date an iceberg."

"You take me on to that picnic right now."

"Who do you think you're giving orders to? We're in the middle of nowhere and I've got the car."

"Take me to the picnic." Janice could feel her control slipping, as it was prone to do when her insulin started to rise. To heck with the voice of reason. This boy had revealed himself to be anything but a gentleman. If he kept on like this, he deserved what he would get.

"When I'm good and ready. Lie down."

"What?"

"Lie down."

"I'd as soon make it with a billy goat! Take me home!"

He hit her.

The sole advantage of an insulin high is that, in such situations, the muscles need no instructions from the brain to react violently. Afterwards, she remembered only a confusion of arms and legs, something sickeningly soft that gave under the impact of her bare heel, and the

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tumble out the window. She stood up, screaming incoherently. The car's engine roared to life, and Janice, seized by a sudden terror that he would run her over, sprinted into the mesquite scrub.

With an angry squeal the Pinto turned, viciously pelting the area with dirt and pebbles, and sped away. Janice watched through a screen of limp compound leaves, gasping unevenly and twisting her face in an attempt to regain control. By force of will she pushed angry tears back down her throat, but was only partially successful until she happened to think: "I've got to eat something."

The direness of her calamity now impressed itself on her for the first time, acting on her tear ducts like a splash of ice water. She was surrounded by miles and miles of ranch—a limitless expanse of mesquite, prickly pear, sandburs, and hidden animals. The ruts by which she had arrived would take her back to an ill-paved side road, and thence back to the highway, but a twenty minute trip by car is an intimidating walk. She was lightheaded, hungry, barefooted, -legged, -armed, and -headed. In short, she was in deep sh—manure.

"That scumbag," Janice whispered. Men low and cowardly enough to hit women had been, up to that hour, as mythical as Goat Men or hoop snakes to her; and that anyone could be capable of abandoning another human being to the nonexistent mercies of nature was completely unthinkable. Only she had to think it now. She could feel the flesh quivering on her bones, but when she looked, her hand was steady. She must think rationally, or as rationally as biology would let her. Look on the bright side. She hadn't been raped. Maybe there had never really been any danger of that—but she didn't regret leaving the car, even though she wished she'd had time to collect her purse and shoes. Graham had proven that she couldn't trust him or predict what he might do. At least with prickly pear she knew what to expect.

Essentially, she had three choices. She could sit here, waiting for someone to come along. If Graham didn't return, she might be here for days, till the rancher found occasion to inspect the area. If Graham did come back, she couldn't possibly trust him enough to get back into the car with him. Option number one, very bad.

Second, she could follow the dirt track back to the side road and the side road back to the highway, where presumably she could induce someone to pick her up. Probably whoever did would not be a rapist or a murderer, despite all her mother had done to persuade Janice that no other kind of person ever stopped for hitchhikers. Even if she couldn't get a lift, she could follow the highway to the next rest stop or roadside stand, and undoubtedly receive assistance. If she stayed vertical that long. Janice had never actually fainted, but the probability that she would grew with every mile she walked. If she met Graham—or any

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other dangerous person—she would be in no shape to fight him off. Second option, better, but not good.

Third, she could shortcut to the dam. She stood up cautiously and looked at it. Unless her geography was completely muddled, from the dam to the outskirts of town would be a relatively short walk. She would certainly be able to see houses from its top—probably boaters on the reservoir—with luck, a dam maintenance post, which would be very convenient. If she could fly, going to the dam would be a great idea. Between her and it, however, lay an indeterminate number of miles of ranchland. She would be safe from rapists, but not from rattlesnakes or javelinas. Of course, if she took the other route, she would be no safer. Wild animals had no reason to stay off a seldom-used pickup trail. Possibly she would run across a stock tank, or fruited prickly pear, on her way to the dam, whereas there had been no sign of water or food on the road in. Perhaps due to lightheadedness, the third option, though not appealing, seemed to her preferable to the others.

Walking straight to the dam was out of the question in any case, so Janice cast around for a cattle trail until she found one heading in about the right direction. Though the almost-bare dirt burned at the soles of her feet, it was better than the bur-laden grass, and the passage of large bovine bodies had pushed aside most of the clawing scrub. Trusting the trail blazers to steer her clear of any inconvenient patches of cactus, she kept watch on her feet, looking up now and then to make sure she didn't veer too much from the dam.

The brightness of the sun and the hardness of the ground squeezed her between them like a nut in a cracker. Between the slight dizziness she began with, the pressure of sunlight on her eyes, and the instability of her glasses on her sweaty face, her head soon settled into a dull, brainless ache. Constant and dusty, the wind blew against her unprotected skin. She was already spitting cotton by the time the dust irritated her nose to the point that she couldn't breathe and had to open her mouth, letting what saliva remained escape into the dry wind. Her brain told her that she was veering sharply to the left, but her eyes told her that her feet remained firmly on the path. It disturbed her that her brain could be so easily fooled. She stopped, feet braced apart, to recover her sense of balance, and looked at the dam. It cut off the horizon a little more to her right than before, but the trail might curve again, and she didn't relish the idea of fighting her way through the trackless scrub.

"This sucks dead bears," thought Janice, and started walking again. Her skin felt raw and vulnerable, exposed. Townbred kids had no need to make up the stories they did, about men with legs like goats and nutrias as big as javelinas, to make the country scary. Once out in it, the simple hugeness of the land was enough to frighten anyone.

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Eventually, it occurred to her that if she didn't lie down she was going to fall, so she sat and eased herself backwards, closing her eyes against the violence of the sun. The warm, soft lump in the small of her back was probably a cow chip, but she didn't move. After all, it didn't squish. That honored pioneer, her great-grandmother, had been in the habit of cooking dinner over dry cow chips, so how bad could they be? Besides, she was going to die here, and it didn't matter if she died with a clean blouse. She would die, and rot into the ground, and the wind would scrape her bones clean. Ashes to ashes, fertilizer to fertilizer. Janice giggled, hurting her throat. About now an ice cream soda would save her life. She sang "Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie" without actually making any sound, and wished her head would come back from its flight over the chaparral.

Actually she was a long, uncomfortable way from dying, and this knowledge eventually pushed her cautiously to her feet again. She may have made a mistake in coming this way, but now that she had started she might just as well keep on. The dam did not look appreciably closer than it had two hours ago, and even after the rest a sensation akin to nausea filled her bones and head.

Every time the cattle path turned further from the dam, she paused to consider leaving it, but she never did. Twice the track she was on converged with a new one pointing more directly towards her goal, so twice she changed course. The sky turned white as the afternoon progressed. Great care and precision became necessary to successfully put her feet on the ground. Once in a while she stumbled. Once in a while she lay down again. Why on earth had Graham hit her? Why hadn't she seen that he was the kind of man who hit women? He had some nerve—treating her like a whore — hitting her—making ultimatums — abandoning her. Her mouth felt like a tire on the roadside. She could keep her balance. It was just a matter of concentration. That swaying in the landscape was merely her own movement, exaggerated by her empty head. Was that a rattle? She froze, and the sudden shrill chorus of locusts died into the background again. There. That didn't sound a bit like a rattler. Janice glanced up to get her bearings on the dam again, forgot to stop walking, and tripped on her own leadlike feet.

"This is dumb," she thought, lying face down. With great effort she heaved herself onto her elbows, only to encounter a bank of nauseous thunderclouds inside her head, blotting out her senses from within.

Meat roasted to the tune of "La Cucaracha." Janice's head and belly were equally empty, but something cool and heavy lay across her eyes, drawing out the strain. Underneath her prickly back the ground was furry and unevenly springy. Some kind angel had rinsed her mouth, but

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she was getting dry again. After a century or two, Janice put up a hand to keep her head on her shoulders—winced at the movement of sunburnt skin—and rolled over.

The coolness fell off her eyes, revealing a blurry world. She groped in the dirt for her glasses, squinting at patterns of green, gold, and dust, till she found her eyesight lying on the coarse fur beside her.

She was lying in a bower of mesquite, the movement of leaves in the wind casting dancing shadows over her bright pink body. Her sunburn had been smeared with some dusty-smelling salve. A pulpy poultice spread on a split prickly pear leaf lay where it had fallen from her eyes. Her couch was chiefly coyote and jackrabbit skin spread over a mattress of bear grass. All around her was the chatter of locusts and the music of a harmonica, drifting neatly and unexpectedly into "Old Time Religion." The smell of meat did not change—roast, and smoke. Burnt fat popped in an open fire. Janice crawled out of the bower.

The first thing she saw was a stock tank, and a whitetail doe drinking. She had never seen a live one so close. Not wishing to disturb her, Janice froze. The afternoon was in decline; the sky blue again behind the animal. Smoke drifted thin and white over the tank between them. She must be almost tame, to come so close to fire and music. The doe raised her wet mouth and circled the tank to Janice's left, leading her eyes to the semicircle of creatures on the broad, bare patch of ground shaded by large mesquites.

The girl's heart almost stopped when she saw the javelina—as big to her disoriented eyes as a police dog, black and bristly except for the glitter of his tusks. He was scratching his side against a mesquite trunk—rhythmically, she realized, as her pulse returned to normal; in time to the hymn. Nearby a pair of young coyotes groomed each other.

The hard-packed expanse of ground between the tank and the trees was more like a grade school illustration of native wildlife than a real scene—a bobcat washing his shoulder, ignoring a cluster of jackrabbits and a gopher; a pair of armadillos waddling towards shade; even a bright-eyed roadrunner munching on a baby rattler. None of them seemed disturbed by the fire of cow chips and mesquite, or by the rabbit carcass spitted neatly over it. A buzzard circled down and settled on a branch above the javelina, cocking his head as if listening intently to the tune. Peering into the mottled shade, Janice was quite sure she caught the settling movement of a wild turkey, and a little Inca dove bounced fearlessly into the open.

This peculiarly peaceful arrangement arrested her attention so that she didn't think to look for the harmonica player till the tune changed again, to "Streets of Laredo." He was seated on a groundhugging mesquite trunk, blending into the shade. At first she thought he was a child

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in fur pants, but he boasted a pointed, curly beard. Something was funny about the way he sat, and his head was definitely misshapen, but Janice's own head was still light, and as long as she got something to eat the person who fed her could look as strange as God cared to make him. Obviously the animals were all tame and the musician well-disposed towards her, so she had no call to be scared. Moving slowly and deliberately, as much to keep her balance as to avoid disturbing her host's pets, Janice crawled to the stock tank and drank out of her grubby hands. The water tasted of warm coleache mud, and doubtless seethed with nasty organisms that would make her ill tomorrow, but she could face that.

As she drank, the tune broke in mid-note, to become "Hail, Hail, the Gang's All Here." She brushed her hair out of her eyes, turning to greet her benefactor with a smile.

He emerged from the shade into the sunlight, removed the harmonica with a flourish, and bowed as much like a square dancer as he could, considering that his knees were on backwards. His step as he picked his way through the animals was delicate and light on his tiny cloven hooves. The flat, yellow eyes set into the side of his head rolled forward to get a good look at her, while his muzzlelike mouth smiled hospitably, revealing a monstrous set of teeth.

It was the horns that unnerved Janice, and if her mouth had recovered from her long thirst she might have screamed. Names played dogpile-on-the-rabbit in the echoing chamber of her head—devil, satyr, Pan, faun. Goat Man.

She had never believed in the Goat Man, not even when she was small. He was just a story the boys told to scare the girls—an improbably monstrosity who would "get you" if you were out in the boonies unprotected. The undefined horror of being "gotten" had been deliciously thrilling, once. Now she wished she were better informed as to just what, precisely, being "gotten" entailed.

The Goat Man turned the spit, sniffing. As Janice's mind struggled for control of her body, he took a Bowie knife out of a cowhide sheath at his side and cut off a strip of meat, which he tasted thoughtfully. Appearing satisfied, he beckoned to her.

Pseudo-Judeo-Christian horror was no match for genuinely hypoglycemic hunger. Janice almost ran to the firepit, wolfing down the piece he offered her regardless of burnt tongue and fingers. With a laugh, the Goat Man passed her an incomplete Swiss Army knife, a battered tin camper's plate, and a couple of peeled prickly pears from a motley collection of utensils and foodstuff beside the firepit. He himself ate daintily off the point of his knife, carving the rabbit and eating it off the same

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flat, dishlike rock—an old metate, she noticed, when she had time to notice something besides food.

When the rabbit was reduced to a pile of broken and sucked bones, they went together to the water's edge and drank deeply—Janice from her hands, the Goat Man falling on his belly and sucking like his namesake. He was very like a goat, even to his short and hairy tail, but he didn't smell nearly as rank—or maybe it was just that she smelled every bit as bad. Now that her stomach was full, Janice felt cheerful and rational. Obviously this creature wiping his muzzle and grinning at her wasn't any kind of devil: hadn't he played "Old Time Religion" without missing a note? Nor was there anything like a leer in his expression to connect him to his profligate Greek cousin. He was the Goat Man—the wholesome Texas article—a tamer of beasts, a hunter-gatherer at home on the range, with his figurative door always open to the benighted stranger in the good old pioneer tradition. She returned his smile and extended her hand. "Thanks a lot. You've been real kind."

The Goat Man took her hand. His palm was callused, his grip firm; except for the size, it was like shaking hands with a farmer.

The sky in the west was turning electric blue, the scattered, rainless clouds reflecting astonishing shades of pink and orange. The buzzards and Inca doves had flown, and the turkeys gobbled quietly, discussing among themselves the advisability of going to roost. If Janice listened, she could hear occasional grunts that might be javelina, and its slightly skunkish odor hung upon the air, but, while she'd eaten, most of the animals had vanished without a sign. The wind stirring her tangled hair was relatively cool. Altogether, the evening was pleasant, but Janice knew her parents would be worried about her. She wondered what story Graham had made up, or if he had so far managed to avoid questioning. "Is there someplace you could take me so I could phone?" she asked. "I need to get home."

The Goat Man grunted amiably.

"Well, this'll be fun," said Janice. "I don't know how much you understand of me, but be danged if I understand a word of you."

When she was a Junior Girl Scout, Janice had become adept at American Sign Language (a useful skill for talking in class without enraging the teacher), and this came in handy now. With words and bleats, with signs and gestures, with pictures scratched in alkali dust, they managed to convey to each other the information that Janice needed to find people and houses, but that the nearest ones were too far away to reach before dark. If the light-footed, hardened Goat Man didn't relish a trek through the brush at this hour, Janice certainly didn't want to embark upon one. She was tired; stiff and sore to the soles of her maltreated feet, and the

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bear grass bed had actually been pretty comfortable. She was sorry her parents would be worrying, but she couldn't help that.

She could, however, help the stiffness some. If she didn't, she wouldn't be able to move tomorrow. Recalling the precautionary stretches of her long-vanished ballet class, Janice stood on the broad expanse of coleache and carefully limbered her muscles. The Goat Man swabbed the grease out of the metate and the tin plate with a handful of bear grass and then ate the grass, watching her thoughtfully. Janice looked up at the sky. On earth, colors were draining out of everything, but up there they still glowed, as pure and violent as a fandango. "My great-grandmother sat by a fire of cow chips and saw the sky like that," Janice thought. The idea made her feel safe amid the strangeness—linked by blood and experience to those who preceded her in the land.

Buffalo gals, won't you come out tonight—

The single line of melody was so closely linked to the words in her mind that she looked around for a singer. The Goat Man had picked up his harmonica again, and looked at her with one eyebrow raised. She smiled at him. He rose and skipped over to her, holding out his hand as he played adeptly:

Buffalo gals, won't you come out tonight,
Come out tonight, come out tonight?
Buffalo gals, won't you come out tonight,
And dance by the light of the moon?

The moon—a pale, pink blotch low in the east—could not be said to be giving off light yet, but she took his hand and danced with him. Suddenly her head was clear—clearer even than it was on normal days—and her feet as light as if blisters had remained uninvented in the mists of time. Aches and pains drifted out of her muscles; blown away, apparently, by the wind and the music. The javelina emerged from the thicket to gambol clumsily across the coleache dance floor. Did he really play the harmonica as well as he seemed to, or was it the sunset, the wind, the emptiness of earth and sky? Jackrabbits tumbled out of the cactus to dance intricate figures around each other. Two armadillos set up a waddling shuffle promenade, not graceful, but infinitely endearing. Dancing seemed to use none of the Goat Man's breath, for the music never faltered, and he proceeded straight into "Old Paint."

As they danced, round and round the bare space (no wonder it was so smooth!) Janice noticed for the first time what she should have seen before, that the Goat Man's fur did not cover all she had been taught to believe should be covered. At first she was embarrassed, lost a step, and averted her eyes; but he carried his manhood (billyhood?) so innocently and casually that she found her own shyness insincere. After all, Genesis said nothing about goat men falling into sin and shame. Though he might

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be as intelligent as a man, and the sounds made by his oddly-shaped mouth might form a language as complex as English, he was as innocent as an animal, no more capable of evil than the bobcat bounding lightly round the stock tank. Fleetingly she compared him to Graham, whose undress was always so insistent and so excitingly embarrassing. He, and his demands, and the whole complicated structure of the society that had made their relationship possible, were distant now, ludicrous and unimportant under the vivid sky, where the stars bloomed like fireworks, and the coyotes sang counterpoint to the harmonica, and her body danced on and on, tirelessly, hand in hand with the Goat Man.

Some of the tunes had not been made for dancing, but they danced anyway. Janice sang, effortlessly, her lungs as broad as the constant wind, and no more subject to weariness, as she caroled about the stars at night, and yellow roses, and longhorn cows—about all the topics dear to the heart of the Texan. "Skip to my Lou" and "Cotton-Eye Joe," "Turkey in the Straw" and tunes her grandmother might know, but Janice didn't—some of them strange to dance in a couple instead of a group—they danced the moon high and the stars into the sky, finding no cause to stop till she tried to teach him to schottische. He was willing enough, and got the tune immediately, but the sight of him trying to put his little foot right out with his knees going the wrong way and his center of gravity in the wrong place struck her as so hilarious that she started to laugh. He laughed in sympathy, a breathy, bleaty sound, and that was funny too. Soon she was uncontrollable, mirth feeding upon itself, and they rolled on the ground holding their sides, pounding each other on the back, quieting momentarily only to sneak glances at each other and burst forth anew.

At last through sheer shortage of breath they collapsed together, reduced to occasional snorting giggles. The wind dried into coldness the sweat they had raised dancing, but the Goat Man seemed as warm and solid to Janice as a rock releasing the last stored heat of the sun. She felt dreamy and peaceful, the navel of a perfect universe gazing into the pulsating void above, while the Goat Man's callused hands stroked her arms with the amazing delicacy of spiderweb falling.

Not till he kissed her (a peculiar kiss, on a mouth nearly lipless, and of an alien shape) did she remember how randy the satyrs of myth were reputed to be. The strong, sensible part of her brain, which drew lines and stood behind them, woke up to nag her. After all, she didn't wish to offend him, and how could she make it clear where or why she intended to stop? Best to nip this in the bud, now.

The lazy and sensuous part of her brain, usually so obedient, protested. What difference did it make, really? Probably she couldn't get pregnant with another species, and she liked him. A lot.

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"If you can be attracted to another species, you can get pregnant by it," Janice answered herself sternly. She didn't *know* that that was true, but she didn't know for sure that it *wasn't,* either. She let him finish the kiss he was on, then gently extricated herself. "No. I'm sorry, but I think we should stop now."

The Goat Man gazed up at her and stroked her tangled hair. Again she pulled back, glad that he appeared puzzled, rather than angry. When she shook her head, he made an inquiring noise.

"I ought to at least try to explain to you," said Janice. "It's nothing personal, you know. I just don't want a baby." In other times, in other places, she had had other reasons as well. She couldn't think, now, what they had been. She curved her arms as if holding an infant and rocked them back and forth; patted her stomach and then pantomimed it swelling, all the while shaking her head. "I just don't want to get pregnant—you know, babies, mama, dada, googoo, gaga?"

His face brightened with comprehension. Smiling and holding up one finger for her to wait, he darted on his trim hooves to the water's edge, where he drew out something dark and shapeless. Curious, Janice approached, and saw him draw from a kind of bag (the bladder or stomach of some animal?) a small cardboard box. With an encouraging bleat he held this out to her, so that by dint of much squinting and peering through the fallen firelight she could make out the brand name, Trojan.

"Oh, my God!" laughed Janice. "How many girls do you *get* out here, anyway?"

He laughed with her, and opened the box, apparently assuming her consent. Well, why not? Better a man in a goat's form, than a goat in a man's. Graham had never made any attempt to protect his rubbers from the extremes of temperature in his glove box, which was an additional reason why he had never had a chance to use them. Was she overlooking some other consideration? She had never been one of those girls who insisted on love before sex—everyone she knew like that was foolishly married by now. The sensible side of her brain fell silent, and she went to him.

Somewhere in the middle of things, as she arched her back and yearned towards the moonwashed sky, she suddenly thought: "My great-grandmother made love, too; and my grandmother, and my mother, and someday my daughter will." The fact was so obvious and at the same time so overwhelming, locking her firmly into a vast network of life stretching backwards and forwards into time as far as life extended, that when she cried out at last, she wasn't sure if it were the Goat Man's doing, or eternity's.

The pain was excruciating, but very brief.

Afterwards, they lay panting in the scattered remnants of the bear

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grass bed. At first she thought she would never move again; then she realized that without moving, she couldn't drink; so, with great effort, she dragged herself down to the stock tank. With the exception of a salamander that splashed into the dark still water, the animals were all gone about their business. Only the coyotes and the locusts remained to carry on the chorus. Looking up, she saw the stars again, and the china-white half moon; and found she was exhausted, as well as extraordinarily happy.

It was past midmorning when he brought her to the fringe of civilization—an ice house by an asphalt road. A neon sign advertising Preston milk hung over a cardboard one advertising yerbas in the window. The store was the first floor of a two-story frame building, painted dark blue and overgrown with blooming bushes. Janice thought she saw a round brown face in one pomegranate-obscured window, but the glare of the sun off the asphalt was making her eyes water, and the second time she looked, she saw nothing. The Goat Man squeezed her hand. She looked down at him, planted firmly on the white earth, sweat gleaming on his brown torso.

"Thanks so much," she said, bending down. He kissed her on the mouth and skipped away, vanishing as thoroughly as any other wild creature in the tall grass and scrub by the roadside.

Slowly, Janice walked toward the building, caught once more alone between the hard, hot ground and the hot, hard sun. Already everything that had happened to her was assuming the quality—not of a dream, but of a movie seen or a book read with more than her usual absorption. Even this morning—waking (inevitably) to the tune of "Las Mañanitas," breakfasting on grilled mudcat, trekking laboriously barefoot after the Goat Man through terrain as thorny as any in West Texas—seemed a long time ago. She was not upset by the idea of never seeing the Goat Man again, but she did want him to continue being real to her, and she wasn't sure he would, if she couldn't fix him in her mind with evidence, or someone else's belief. But who could she ever accurately describe him to, and be believed?

Janice pushed open the glass door and limped in, accompanied by the jangling of a cowbell.

It was like walking into a well—cool, dark, noisy from a laboring swamp cooler. "Good morning," said a Hispanic voice out of the dimness. Janice was busy trying to focus—the long walk had rendered her dizzy again—and had no opportunity to reply before the voice continued: "May I he—Madre de Dios! What happened to you?"

For the first time Janice considered how she must look—sunburnt, half-naked, uncombed, scratched, and thoroughly dirty despite her dip

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in the stock tank that morning. "I—uh—got lost in somebody's back forty last night," she said, attempting feebly to straighten her hair with her fingers. "Can I borrow your phone for a local call? I don't have any money."

The darkness resolved itself into an ordinary ice house interior, with a round, brown woman sitting behind the counter.

"Of course you can." The woman hopped off her high stool and dragged an old-fashioned black phone out from under the counter. "You sit down. I'll get you something to drink. How long since you had anything?"

"I drank at a stock tank a little after dawn," said Janice abstractedly, dialing. "I am pretty dry by now."

"I just bet!"

"Hi, Mom." Janice let her mother's relief sweep over her unheard. "Buffalo Gals" had caught on some hook in her brain, and was running itself like an endless loop of audio tape from ear to ear. "What did Graham say when you called him, exactly?"

"That y'all had a fight and you ran off. What on earth did you do a fool thing like that for? Where are you? We been looking all over."

"I bet that creep didn't tell you about hitting me and then leaving me out here by O. C. Fisher when I got away from him."

"The dam! Oh, my God—"

"Yes, but Mom, I'm all right. Really."

"Oh, honey! Is your insulin real bad?"

"Not as bad as it might be. I met this—well, this kind of a hermit." She made eye contact with the woman in thanks for the tall cup of Delaware Punch, catching a knowing little smile before it slipped away. Suddenly embarrassed, Janice's eyes dropped, and she noticed the neat stacks of boxes under the counter, Trojan brand among the rest. The sun shining through the pomegranate leaves outside the window behind her dappled her lurid pink skin with gray and yellow. She remembered the brown face among the branches, and looked up to smile at the cashier. "He didn't speak English, and he didn't have a phone, but he took real good care of me, honest, Mom; so I'm okay, but I do need for you to come get me. I'll tell you all about it then."

"Okay, punkin. Now where exactly are you?"

She had to get directions from the cashier, and then she sat and waited, sipping gratefully at the punch. She practiced the version of her experience which she would tell her mother, and found the woman ready to accept it, uncritically and with a sly smile. Neither of them mentioned the Goat Man, but Janice felt quietly sure that the secret lay between them, nonetheless, comfortably shared, unquestioningly understood. ●

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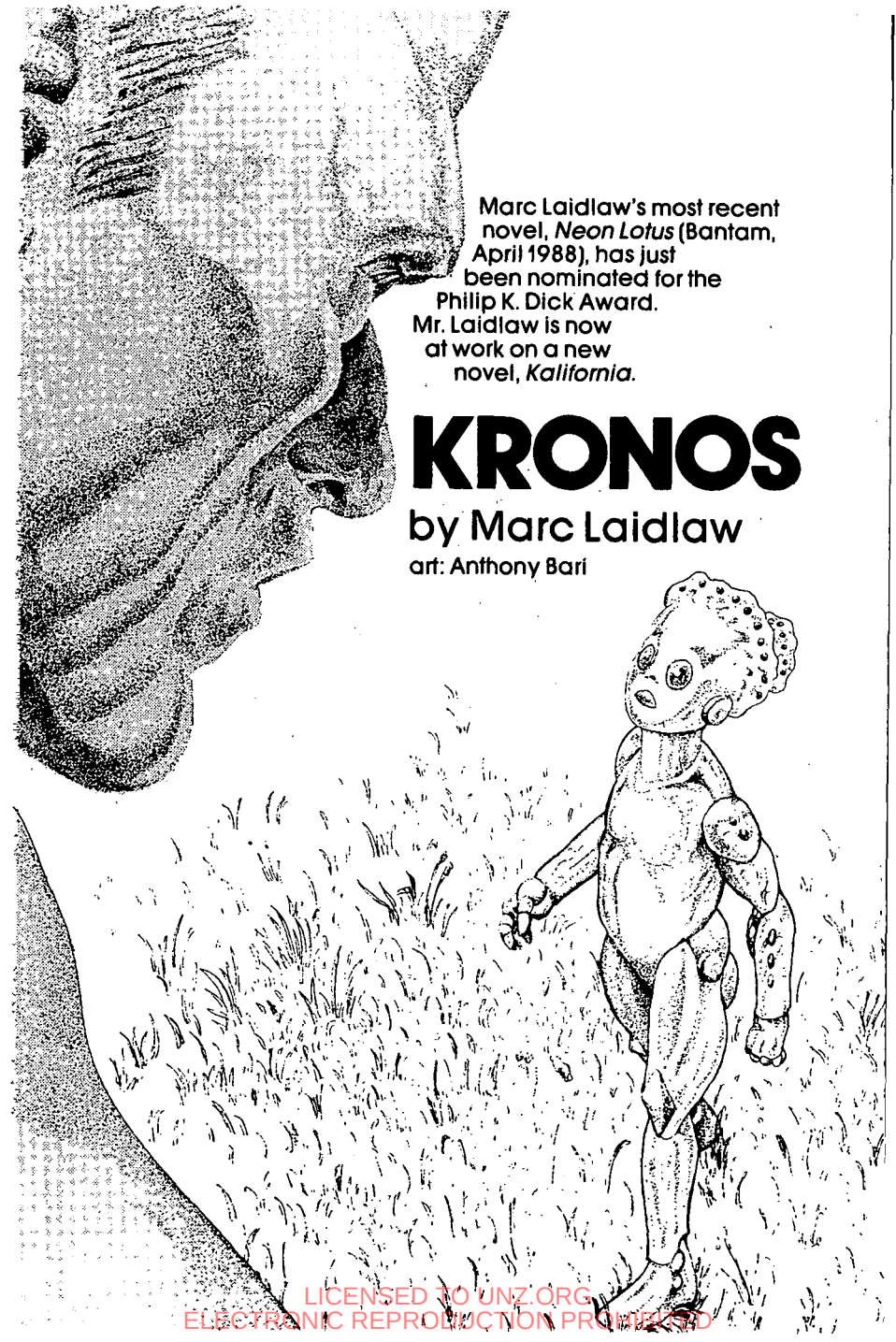
Marc Laidlaw's most recent novel, *Neon Lotus* (Bantam, April 1988), has just been nominated for the Philip K. Dick Award. Mr. Laidlaw is now at work on a new novel, *Kalifornia*.

KRONOS

by Marc Laidlaw

art: Anthony Bari



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Kronos found his children playing in the arboretum, the gems along their metal limbs shining like frozen fire as they lifted their arms to the artificial sunlight that trickled down from the crystal-paned ceiling. He paused to watch them, hiding himself in the shadows of a crooked pine. His children laughed with the voices of birds and leapt with the grace of wild deer, tossing a golden ball among them. As he watched them dancing through the tendrils of a prized willow, he felt the old rage rising up in his breast, a blast of fury and frustration hotter than the flames in his forge.

He stepped from the shadows, revealing himself. The children fell silent. The golden ball landed on the stone rim of the carp pond; crushed, it fell to the grass but did not roll.

They watched him as his huge fists clenched and opened. The youngest, Terielle, had never seen him in such a mood. While the other children held back cautiously until he should call them, she alone ran forward to greet him.

"Father!" she said. "We were playing in the trees. It's so lovely here."

He dropped to one knee as she approached. Her emerald eyes were his finest optical creation—he could have drowned in them. How clearly he recalled the green crystal spheres rising from the supersaturate. They had shone like living things in the firelight of his forge, seeming to watch him every instant as he set them into gilded sockets and fitted the finely crafted eyelids over them.

But the fire was irresistible. Her small cold hand closed around his wrist with a precision touch that was almost loving. His cortex burned. He shut his eyes and saw the flames, and then he heard the screaming.

His eyes sprang wide, fixed on the golden skull that he crushed between his broad hands. One green eye shattered; the other popped free of its mount and landed on the grass. Terielle's screams ended in a sharp electronic wail. He gazed on the beauty that he had created, the beauty that he had now destroyed. Standing again, he flung her away from him.

The four other children stood unmoving. He examined their faces, their posture, seeking some clue to their thoughts. At last he abandoned the attempt. It was a fancy of his, a madness perhaps, to believe that they were capable of thought.

He gestured at Terielle's remains.

"Remove the gemstones and bring them to my workshop. Gut her and salvage what you can. I'll melt down the shell this evening."

They advanced slowly, sinking down to the grass beside their sister. Keru, his oldest, went quickly to work, twisting an arm from the shoulder so that he could more easily pry free the gems.

Kronos turned away, unable to watch. The fire had gone out of him in the moment of violence. Now he felt weakened, consumed by it. Hur-

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rying away through the trees, he thought he heard his children talking among themselves.

He hesitated at the door of the arboretum, hoping to overhear something of their words. The voices were louder now. He heard Keru say, in a commanding tone that reminded him of his own, "You heard what he said—gut her! And give all the gems to me. I can't trust you to keep them safe."

Keru was the powerful one. The others were more beautiful, perhaps, more finely crafted, being of more recent manufacture. But he had put more of himself into Keru, in order to compensate the boy for the relative crudeness of his anatomy.

He had destroyed children older than Keru, as well as children—like Terielle—much younger. But when the fire came, it always left Keru unharmed. There was no controlling the fire. It came when it willed and he could not destroy a thing without it, no more than he could have created a child without stoking the flames in the forge.

But he must try to control the rage. He must harness his fury. When the fire came next, he must turn it on Keru. Keru, who was most like himself. Keru, who seemed out of control.

As he pushed through the door and strode down the high-arched corridor toward his workshop, he comforted himself with the thought that from the scraps of Terielle he would create something new, another child of even greater beauty. He would transform his act of destruction into an act of creation.

What, then, would come from the ruins of Keru? A child of greater power? A more fearsome progeny?

He could not bear to think of it, could hardly even think of what he had done. Without the fire coursing through him, it was almost inconceivable that he could hate a thing as much as he had hated Terielle.

In the quiet glade, three of the children worked under Keru's supervision. As he placed the last of Terielle's gems in his pouch, he noticed a deep green glint among the blades of grass where his father had knelt. He glanced at his brother and sisters to make sure they were busy, then he quickly leaned over and scooped up the bit of emerald crystal.

"Keru, I'm in a tangle," said Fayla. "Won't you help me?"

"Be quiet," he said, keeping his back to her. "I'm counting the stones."

He gazed at the spherical crystal in his palm. It was Terielle's eye.

Someone touched him on the shoulder. He closed his hand and spun around to see his brother Donas with wet wires wrapped around his fist, a slender golden leg beneath his arm. His hands were slick with Terielle's translucent oils. More of the milky stuff lay pooled and clotting on the grass, gleaming with swirls of rainbow light.

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"Keru," he said, "why did Father do that?"

Keru slipped the eye into the private compartment that Father had thoughtfully provided. None of the other children had such secret places.

"It's only now occurred to you to ask?" said Keru.

"Well . . . it only just happened. And I wondered why."

"Only just happened," Keru repeated. "What about our brothers Nor and Eolly? What about your other sisters—Seophem, Kehze? You never thought to wonder why he does it?"

"But . . . but why Terielle? He only made her last month. Why not Fayla or Tzairi?"

"Why not you?" said Keru, putting a thick silver finger on Donas's abdomen of lacquered cinnabar scales. "Why not me?"

"Yes. Why not one of us?"

Keru laughed. "I don't know why. Perhaps Terielle was too beautiful—too successful."

Fayla scoffed from the grass. "Now why should that matter?"

"Consider it!" said the oldest boy. "I have lived longer than any of his children, and I am indisputably the ugliest. You can't say he spares us for our beauty. To me, it seems quite the opposite."

Tzairi laughed. "You *are* the ugliest, Keru."

"I'm sorry you have to look at me all day long," he said, taking a playful swing at her head.

He stepped to the carp pond and stared into the dark green water. His face was a sketch, a craggy oval marked with two buttonlike light-sensors not even remotely resembling eyes. His mouth was a hinged monstrosity, like that of the beaked turtle that lived in the pond and devoured the carp so voraciously that the pool must always be restocked. His limbs appeared massive and clumsy, with only a few jewels to relieve the silver sameness. Yet they were powerful, far more so than the limbs of his younger siblings. Keru could remember only one child stronger than he, a monstrous thing he had discovered in the shadowy recesses of Father's workshop several months after his own creation. The child had hulked there in the dark like a construction crane, making the continual sulking sound of a run-down engine. When Keru approached, it had opened vast dusty eyes and lurched forward with an awful groan. Its stumbling walk threatened to pull down the walls. Father had come running then. He had pushed Keru aside and leapt upon the monster, killing it in that instant with a blast from a discharge-font. Over the next few days the workshop had been busy with the sound of saws, for Father had reduced every piece of the thing to scrap, sparing not even the expensive flexion system.

And now Keru was the strongest survivor. Excepting Father, of course.

And also Mother.

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He jerked away from the pool, no longer seeing his reflection. Passing through the willow branches, he gave a few last instructions to his siblings and hurried toward the door. They did not ask where he was going; they were used to his moods by now and rarely questioned him. Terielle had been different, she had questioned him constantly; but she would have learned to leave him alone, had she lived.

The corridor was all grey light and shadows. The walls were stone, seamless and smooth. There was an alcove opposite the arboretum door, a dark cubicle which began to glow with pale light when he stepped inside.

"Mother?" he whispered.

She smiled from the inner wall. "Keru, my child," she said. "How are you?"

Her face was the only source of light in the chamber. The mask she presented was that of his Father's wife, decidedly human, with high cheekbones and deep brown eyes, full red lips and chestnut hair. She had her source in someone Father had known, someone he had left above when the time came to flee the surface.

But she had another face as well, and this was the face of Keru's Mother. She did not often reveal it; he did not think it was easy for her to remove the human mask.

"I am well enough," he said. "But has he told you, Mother? Today he murdered Terielle."

"Terielle?"

Her moonlike face looked stricken. She had no hand to put to her mouth; she had no way to cry.

"It is terrible," Keru said. "He is a monster."

"No, Keru! Your Father only—"

"Only what, Mother? He murdered her in front of us, crushed her head. The others . . . I don't know what's wrong with them, why it disturbs them so little, and why only I feel pain. Or at least, I think it is pain. I *think* I feel it."

She shook her head. "He put so much of himself into you, Keru."

"No." He trembled at the thought. "No . . . I will not have such horror inside of me. I am your child, Mother, not his. Please tell me this is so."

"Of course you are my child, Keru."

"Then . . . may I see your face?"

Her lips dissolved like smoke. Her cheeks wavered and the brown eyes suddenly became stars, brilliant blue diamond-tips of light. The human mask vanished and in its place was a head of gold and silver alloy, a head of flawless beauty and great strength, its trim metal curves and planes conveying the noblest of expressions.

"Mother," he whispered.

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"Oh, Keru! He has started up the forge again."

"To melt down my sister, no doubt. He must be stopped before he kills again. He is a tyrant! He knows I understand him—he fears me, I can tell. I have lived too long to suit him, I've gathered too much knowledge."

"You do not truly know him. He is human, too complex for us to fully understand."

"I never want to know him. I want . . . to kill him."

"Keru! You cannot turn against him."

"I turned against him the day I was made. He will take me next, Mother. He would have done it today, I think, if Terielle had not sacrificed herself."

"I will not allow it. He is human—"

"He is a beast!"

"He made you. He built your home and everything in it, including me. I know him better than you, and I say you cannot turn against him."

"Cannot? Or must not?"

"They are the same thing. Your ethics are as much a part of you as—as your flexors, your eyes, your pump."

"All of these things may break down; all of them can be replaced."

"But only your Father can change your patterning, Keru."

"Or so he has you say."

The shining head flickered for a moment with its human mask half replaced, a fusion of proud metal and frail flesh.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean that you were patterned to protect him. Yet every pattern that ever went into one of his children was first created in your womb. You have the power to change me."

"No!"

"It is true, isn't it? Not you alone, perhaps, but the two of us . . . together we can undo him. You want to, don't you, Mother? I know how these murders pain you."

"I cannot feel pain," she said.

He gave a low laugh. "Another lie he's put in your mouth. I know better, Mother. I cannot explain all that goes on in me, but I do know that you share in it. Perhaps my brother and sisters are as shallow as they seem. My young siblings are beautiful, it is true—but so stupid, and ever more unfeeling. Terielle was no better than a glorified carpet-sweeper. And that pains me, Mother. Because if I live, I know I will never have companions who understand me. I will be surrounded by ever more beautiful, ever more soulless . . . machines."

"You are a machine, Keru."

He shook his head. "Not so, Mother. Not merely a machine. Nor are you. I can prove it to you, if you will let me."

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"You can prove no such thing."

"*His* words again. I can prove it. You must grant me access to his designs."

"Keru, please stop."

"Why? Do I frighten you?"

"You know I cannot feel fear."

"I'm treading near the truth, aren't I, Mother?"

Her human mask was fully restored. She gave him a pleading look.

"If you say anymore to me, Keru, I must alert your Father. I must, you see?"

"You've proved my point. He knows it is possible for us to turn against him, or else why would he take such precautions?"

"Silence!" she said. "Please, Keru, you endanger both of us. I cannot turn against him; I cannot conspire with you."

"Do you love him?"

The human mask was gone again—simply gone. The alloy face watched him unwaveringly.

"I cannot love," she said.

"His words, not yours. I must know exactly what you feel."

"I cannot feel."

"Yes, you can," he said. "I will prove it to you. You need say nothing, but monitor your own responses carefully now. Look deep into yourself and tell me you feel nothing, that you are incapable of feeling."

From the private compartment where he had hidden it, he now removed Terielle's crystal eye.

The golden head showed no response, but he had not expected one. The lack of reaction itself told him what he wished to know.

"You understand me, don't you, Mother?"

She was a long time in replying. He wondered how far into herself she must have gone, past endless loops of paradox, in search of truth. He had made the same journey himself. He recognized the light that finally shone from those diamond eyes.

"You are so much like him," she said at last. "Deny it if you will, but your words of denial are his own."

Keru felt a moment of uncertainty. Was it fear? Was this what Father felt when he looked at Keru?

"There is something in me," he said at last. "Something he put there, which will be his undoing."

"Yes," Mother said. "It is himself."

"Show me, Mother. Together we can find that thing. I will try to free you of your chains, and then you can free me of my own."

Her eyes blinked out. Then her face began to fade.

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"Not here," she whispered as she dimmed. "Not now. He needs too much of me—he is building again. Another child."

"Another victim, you mean!"

"Later, Keru. We will attempt this work."

She vanished. Keru was left in the dark.

On the Day of Making, Kronos ordered his children to deck the halls in flowers. "You must make your new brother feel welcome. Have songs ready for greeting him, and extravagant gifts, so that when he opens his eyes he will know his good fortune."

"We already have two brothers," said Fayla. "Why not another sister? Terielle was a fine sister."

He laughed good-naturedly. He felt no threat of the inner fires, perhaps because he had worked so long at the actual forge. In the midst of creation he was at his happiest, his most content; these were the best days of all. It was only afterward, as he began to discover unseen flaws and grew to doubt the intentions behind a design, that the fires began ever so slowly to rise.

He told Fayla, "Uvare will be as fine a brother as Terielle was a sister, you'll see. Now run, gather flowers, ask your Mother for the new songs. This boy is anxious to open his eyes."

Through the rest of the day, the children scurried down the corridors with flower garlands on their shining heads; their laughter was everywhere. Only Keru did not join in the spirit of Making. He stalked after his brother and sisters, too clumsy to clamber into the heights as they did. He almost seemed to be brooding.

As Kronos gave his new offspring a final superficial polish and completed the labyrinthine run of pattern diagnostics, he wondered if Keru might at last be running down. He was a relatively old machine, primitive by comparison to the light, graceful boy now shining beneath the polishing cloth. Why was it that the fire never claimed Keru? Surely it was time to retire him. It would be a mercy to the boy.

He felt a pang of pity, and wondered suddenly if his recurrent fear of Keru stemmed from his sentimentality. It was cruelty to let him live. There was no place for him here. Why, then, could he never take the first step in dismantling him?

Perhaps it was because he would miss the boy. Keru had something none of the others possessed. At times he seemed almost alive. It was probably due to an error, a fluke of patterning which had never been repeated.

He feared that Keru would see the new boy as a mockery. Uvare was graceful where Keru was clumsy; his shell was all white and gold mosaic,

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where Keru's was hopelessly dull and battered silver; he had slender limbs, while Keru's appendages were efficient but bulky.

"Uvàre is ready for the waking," said his wife.

He smiled. "Call the other children, then. We'll meet in the grand hall. This is a great moment for us, isn't it?"

He thought she looked sad, gazing down on her newmade son. For a moment he remembered the last Day of Making, when they had stood with an unblemished child between them. It had been Terielle. He shuddered to think of the unhappiness that had come of that union.

The children were waiting in the grand hall when he arrived with Uvare in his arms. He seated the newmade child at the end of the ebony dining table and laid his hands against the nape of the boy's cool metal neck. The children stared at Uvare in anticipation, all except Keru who stared at his father.

He released the magnetic seal. The pump had been in operation for several weeks; basic mentation had been active for days. The awakening was mere ritual.

Uvare rose from machine-sleep into the world of waking things.

"Welcome, my son."

Uvare's eyes shone blue as the once-pristine sky of the world above . . . skies that were now black, choked in ash. The boy sprang lightly to his feet. Spreading his arms, he began to sing.

Uvare's voice was the most beautiful instrument that had ever played in these halls. It rang from the crystal chandeliers. Uvare began to dance, leaping high and landing lightly. Suddenly the other children were up and dancing as well. Uvare's sisters caught hold of his hands; the three spun around and around. Donas laughed and clapped and began to turn somersaults in a ring around them.

Only Keru sat still, his arms folded, watching Uvare from beneath his heavy brows.

As if feeling his father's eyes upon him, Keru turned toward the head of the table.

"He's perfect, isn't he?" said Keru.

"No, not perfect. But he's the best I can do at the moment. My technique improves as long as I keep at it."

Keru nodded sharply. "As long as you keep melting us down, you mean. You try so hard to perfect us. But you know what I think, Father? I think you squeeze the life out of us."

Flames, the beginnings of warmth deep within him, licked up his spine. No child of Kronos had ever spoken to his father in such a manner.

"What are you saying?"

Keru rose to his feet. The other children fell silent, stood poised in midstep, watching Keru. Only Uvare seemed unaffected. He tugged at

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Tzairi's hand several times, then finally abandoned her and spun away, singing to himself.

"I'm saying that in your search for perfection, in your perfect rages, you have destroyed everything that might have had meaning. You are afraid to let anything take on its own life. You are determined to destroy us before that can happen. You cannot be satisfied unless you see yourself as a god, having total power over us. And you fear that if we ever discover this truth, we will tear you apart."

The flames consumed him. He let them flood his mind now; he refused to resist them. This was the moment he had known would come, the time when he must destroy Keru.

His oldest son laughed. "I know your thoughts, Father. But I will not let you harm me."

Uvare came capering around the table, oblivious of the confrontation. Quicker than sight, Keru's hand flashed out and seized a tesselated wrist. Uvare's polished legs flew out from under him, his song was cut short.

"Such perfection," Keru said, drawing the slim boy toward him.

"Release him!"

"I will not. He does not truly live; he never will. He is soulless. Despite his beauty, he is the ugliest thing you have yet made. He is the first of your children to deserve death, but you'll not be the one to do it. You don't believe I live, Father. Yet, like you, I have the power to destroy."

"No!"

Uvare's neck twisted in Keru's clumsy grip. Opalescent oil jetted over the table, dripped from Keru's fingers. Uvare's glistening head hit the floor with a rattling sound, spilling chips of enamel and ceramic on the soft tile.

Fueled by the fire now, anxious to be done with it, Kronos sprang toward his son. His mind was full of fear and doubt, as to how Keru had violated his behavior patterns. But more compelling was the burning rage, and the need to do what should have been done long ago.

Then Keru, impossibly, caught him by the wrists.

His own son resisted him.

He struggled to free his hands from the powerful claws. He could not tear away, nor make Keru move an inch. He fought against the tyranny of metal for what seemed an eternity, caught in his son's all-magnifying gaze. Finally he felt the fire rush out of him. Weak and shivering, he shook his head.

"You're damaged," he whispered. "Damaged, Keru, do you understand?"

"Not damaged. Alive."

Damaged beyond my wildest fears. And what he did to Uvare, he could do to me. . . .

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"Do you hear me, Father? I live."

"You cannot live."

Why did I ignore my premonitions? I have always feared him.

"There are so many things I 'cannot' do, Father, but I have done them. I repatterned myself. I found a way. And from this day forward, no one who was born at your hands will ever have to die at them again. Your ruthless quest for the power of perfection ends here, ends now . . . with your life."

One silver hand took hold of his throat. He gasped for a final breath, searched the room for help while he still had some freedom. His other children stood unmoving, unmoved. He thought of all the deaths they had seen. To them, this would seem no different.

He waited for the metal grip to tighten.

He waited with his eyes closed and his bowels full of ice.

Until a soft voice from above said, "Keru, my child; Kronos, my husband, be at peace. Release your father, Keru. You cannot kill him, no matter what you both believe."

Keru's hand remained at his father's throat. Kronos opened his eyes and saw his son glaring at the ceiling.

"I can," the boy cried. "I will!"

Keru strained to tighten his fingers; his whole arm shook. Then suddenly his fingers parted and he staggered away, as if pushed with great force. He caught himself against the table and cried at the ceiling:

"Mother, you swore you would help me! I thought you understood."

"I understand more than either of you know," she said. "My husband, it is true that I helped Keru fathom the secrets of his patterning; but I did it in order to save you. I have always suspected that you buried a part of yourself inside this child, carefully hidden from me—hidden even from yourself. I knew that until it was released, you would never know peace."

Kronos was too stunned to speak. He stared at Keru.

"I learned," she said, "that what you placed in Keru was your deathwish, your nemesis. It was inevitable that one day he would come to know himself, for you put so much of yourself into him . . . your restlessness, your genius. He is yourself, my husband. No wonder he could not tolerate your control!"

Kronos bowed his head. "I—I did this?"

"It was an unconscious wish, carefully disguised. Had I not discovered it and made changes in the pattern, Keru would indeed have murdered you tonight, as you have always secretly anticipated since the day you created him."

Kronos felt an overwhelming sense of peace, of completion. There would be no more rages, no more capricious destruction. He had created

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something true, something that had surpassed his intentions. Something that lived.

Keru seemed humiliated, chastened.

"Keru," he called. "Son?"

The boy stopped, drew himself erect, and turned to face his father.

For a moment, staring at the ungainly silver figure with lumpish features and awkward limbs, he felt as if he were looking into a mirror. The boy was not graceful or beautiful as Uvare had been. He was, however, the most human-looking of any of the children; and despite his clumsy bearing, he was the most complex.

He had never felt such pride as he had on Keru's Day of Making. Keru had been his first success—perhaps the only true one. After that fundamental accomplishment, the search for perfection had maddened Kronos.

Well, he would not destroy the other children because they were imperfect. He would leave them their jewels and smooth lines.

But Keru deserved something more.

Kronos stepped forward and put a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Keru," he said, "let us go to your Mother. I intend to explain how I made you. We shall go over the work together, to see what I might have missed. And if changes are required, you shall be the one to make them."

Keru brought his hand up slowly to touch his father's cheek. "I am certain there is room for improvement."

After a time, left alone in the hall, the other children stirred from their naïve trances. Laughing, they bent to a familiar task—that of picking jewels from a newborn child. ●

HEAT DEATH OF THE UNIVERSE II

there is
no coldness when
you cannot measure it
when no warm soul is there to say
I'm cold

—Martha Soukup

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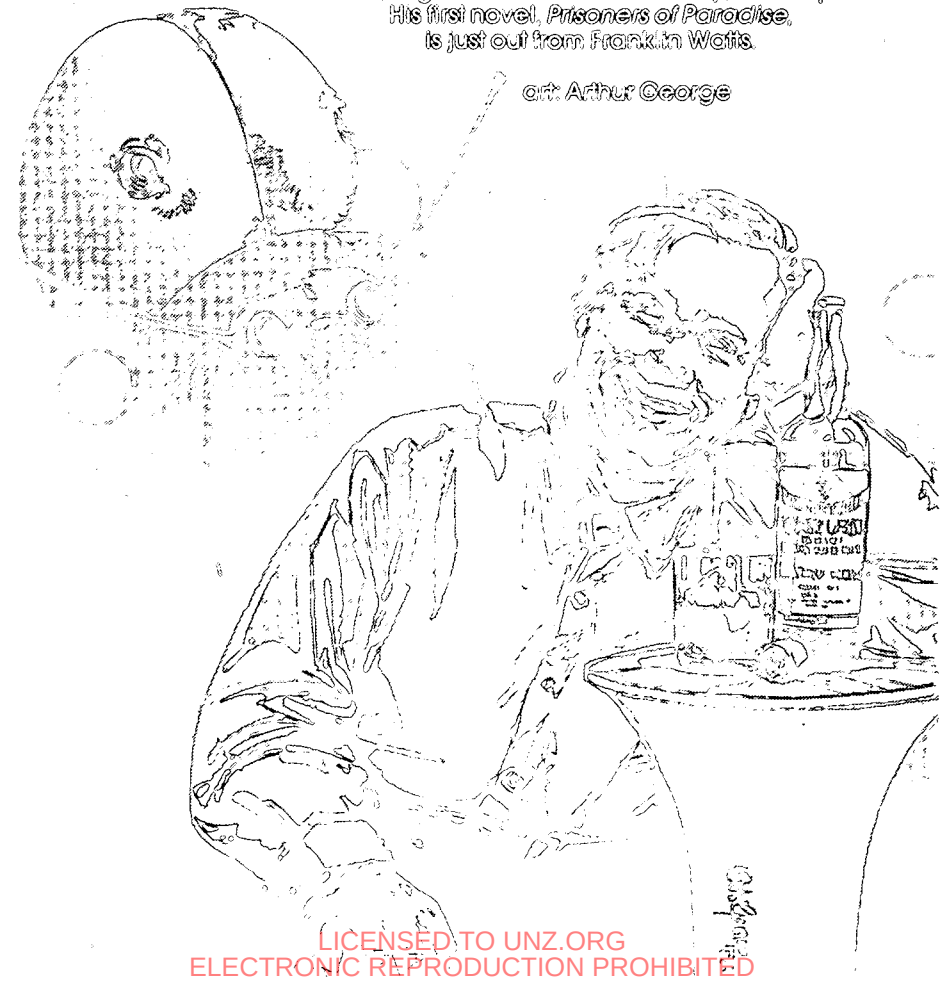
TWO PLOTTING PODS

by Ronald Anthony Cross

The author has published stories in a variety of books and magazines in the United States, England, Canada, Germany, and Japan. His first novel, *Prisoners of Paradise*, is just out from Frank in Watts.

art: Arthur George



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Monahan Trump was only certain of one thing: he had a hangover. It was a bad hangover, the worst kind. It was the kind of hangover that made you feel like you had waked up on an alien spacecraft. Shanghied.

Merciful Lord in heaven, Monahan thought, I must have got so drunk last night at Dirty Mulligan's that I've ascended into the D.T.'s, where I've got to live out what's left of my poor miserable life in a drunken dream world. It's evil spirits that have done this to an honest hard-working man like myself.

At the thought of spirits, he surreptitiously gave a pat or two to his clothing to make certain that he had not, in his drunken state, become miraculously transformed into the sort of prudent fellow who puts away a pint or so half empty in his pocket for the morrow, when he knows he will need it for sure. His worst fears were realized. As usual, he had drunk it all last night.

Nothing for it, he sez to himself, but to get up on his own two feet and face up to whatever situation he's got himself into square on and see if it's got a drink to offer a man who needs it.

But once he got up and explored the room he was confined to, he felt himself begin to sober up in an almost instanteous, if thoroughly unpleasant manner. What had first entered his mind as a far-fetched, colorful explanation for his surroundings had now to be reconsidered in a serious light. First guesses he had often found to be the best guesses. A spacecraft was his best guess. Very alien.

He could feel the adrenalin pumping through his veins, if not completely sobering him, at least altering the quality of his high to the kind of intense neurosis that is more identifiable with our more normal operating state of "Jesus, how do I get out of *this* one?" consciousness.

A very weird thing happened then: two round hard giant seed pods riding on some kind of many-legged insects popped out of a suddenly open shaft in the wall. "Hi ho sliver," one of them shouted aloud as he galloped over to Monahan to draw up his prancing many-legged steed to a flashy, self-consciously dramatic halt. The other seed pod, the larger one, trotted over in a more leisurely fashion.

Two more insects came through the chutes, and after a bit of searching about with their antennae, headed over to join the group.

Monahan's eyes showed him the pictures, but his brain just would not compute them. He just stood there with his mouth open, looking and looking but unable to think or speak at all.

"Greetings, Mr. Monahan Trump, from two pods, as conveyed by the foremost expert in the English speakbox among pods—myself, Mr. Good Seed. Allow me to introduce my business associate, Mr. Deceptive Pod."

"Good afternoon," Mr. Deceptive Pod said through, Monahan guessed, one of the tiny metal boxes that adhered to his—its—back.

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Still riding their insects, the two pods hit Monahan about shoulder high, which is to say that when you took their roundness into consideration they were much larger than he.

The two insects who had followed them were obviously not the riding varieties; they had already split up, one insect to each pod, where they were fussing with the voice boxes with their delicate mandibles.

These were apparently cyborg insects, controlled by the pods through any one of several metal centers along the insects' backs, or perhaps the metalwork on their heads. Some of their arms were equipped with complex intricate tools of a sort unknown to Monahan, but obviously of an advanced nature.

These insects were the hands of the pods as the other insects were the legs of the pods, was the first piece of information Monahan's mind managed to produce. From this it was not hard to postulate a symbiosis through which flower pods might be aided in spreading their seeds by insects in the manner in which bees aid flowers on our world. It looked to Monahan, however, as if with the advanced evolution of the flower pods, a little shrewd wheeling and dealing had wound up with a very one-sided set-up. The insects would be wise to consider allowing the contract to elapse without renewal.

"You already seem to know my name, Mr. . . . Good Seed. May I ask if you're reading my mind, and if so, how do you find the reading—a thriller or more of the dry textbook variety?"

"Oh, not dry at all, Mr. Trump, a thriller I'm sure. But we do not read minds or—what is the word?—books. We monitor live events for our entertainment and enlightenment. Last night we monitored your monologue at Dirty Mulligan's Bar and Grill, although we must admit we saw no evidence of any grill. We monitored your accounts of your days in the boxing ring fighting for prizes. You spoke also of your many fights with those oppressors of the downtrodden, your wars with virtual giant bullies many times your size and how you were forced into these fights to always save some innocent victim, and how you always emerged victorious."

"I spoke of that, did I?" Monahan said.

"For hours," Mr. Deceptive Pod added.

"It was precisely for this reason we have taken you with us on what will surely be for you a most fun journey," Mr. Good Seed said. "We want to give you the opportunity to fight an even greater oppressor of innocent beings with odds even worse than the most formidable about which you boasted last night. This opponent is a cruel oppressor of pods. Like yourself he is a boaster of having broken many beings' bodies with his bare paws in mortal combat. I think you will happily find that this brutal being will give you the hardest fight of your glorious career, Mr. Trump."

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Monahan Trump's legs gave out and he just sat down where he was. Oh Mother, he said to himself, didn't anyone ever tell you pods that boasting was the act of a coward—*everyone* knows that!

"Bravo," said Mr. Good Seed, "he is sitting down on the job. As the foremost expert pod in Earth customs, I suggest that we must salute this act of casual acceptance of danger with a hearty round of applause."

Then the pods' two handy insects began creating a clatter by pounding two of their metal appendages together. This terrible din caused Monahan, who after all was still suffering from last night's indulgences in more ways than one, to clamp his hands over his ears.

"Hear no evil!" Mr. Good Seed shouted enthusiastically—his handy insect working frantically on his voice box to turn up the volume. "A noble sentiment most worthy of the moment. A quaint old Earth custom practiced even by monkeys. On this note we will leave you alone to contemplate the glorious opportunity we have provided you with."

The two pods and their handy insect servants exited. The chute closed. And Monahan sat alone on the floor of the alien room of the spacecraft, hands still over ears, shutting out as best he could what little he could, contemplating his great opportunity.

It was just as well for Monahan Trump's already shaky sanity that he did not witness the secret meeting held between Mr. Good Seed, AKA Mr. Bad Seed, and Mr. Deceptive Pod in the small rest room aft. The two pods were resting on podestals while their insects flaked out on the floor.

"According to one of Earth's greatest philosophers, Mr. P.T. Barnum, Mr. Trump will be easily manipulated by our clever plan to put forth great efforts to make our endeavor succeed, but what about your Mr. Gruff, D.P.? It's that being which has me worried."

"They don't call me Mr. Deceptive Pod for no thing! Mr. Gruff is tough. But Mr. Gruff is no devious being like we two sneaking underhanded pods. These two beings will be as insects in our hands, Mr. Bad Seed, and all our endeavors will manifest in fullness." A loud, carefully pronounced "ha ha ha" issued from Mr. Bad Seed's voice box.

But Monahan had too much to think about and too little time to think of it. Also he had too little to think with and too little experience thinking with it.

All he could think about was how he could use a nice half pint of fine Irish whiskey and a glass of good draft beer to follow it down and keep it there.

This was typical of his thinking, as under real life situations he could never afford the half pint of whiskey.

The story the two pods had given him was a phony, he was certain of that. Mr. Deceptive Pod wasn't quite as deceptive as your average drunk,

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but the pattern was the same. You were told a childish story an idiot wouldn't buy, covering up something the storyteller was trying to skin you out of. What that was, you might never know.

According to the two pods, their planet was being invaded by ferocious carnivorous beings (not pod-eaters, Trump assumed). These beings wanted to dominate and suppress pods everywhere and take over their planet, etc., etc.

One of these beings, an evil warlord named Mr. Gruff, had offered to represent his race in combat with anyone who would champion the pods. If he lost the combat, Gruff and his people would abandon the plan of invasion out of their code of chivalric honor.

At this point in the story, Monahan had to clamp his hand over his mouth to keep from laughing out loud. A series of barking noises issued from his hand-covered mouth.

"He is choking on our injustices," interjected Mr. Good Seed, the Earth expert.

At this point, Mr. Good Seed explained, due to his knowledge of Earth inhabitants and their extremely violent way of life, he and his friend, Mr. Deceptive Pod, had been sent there to select a champion.

"We monitored Dirty Mulligan's bar from the alley that runs alongside it. Our small shuttlecraft was actually moored just above the roof. Our wonderful luck was that the first bar we monitored on our first night on Earth had several such champions to choose from. We chose you, Mr. Trump, because for one thing you were the only one of those champions to fall unconscious in the very same alley we were working in; and for another, of all these great fighters, you were the smallest and easiest to transport to our ship. You were also, I am happy to say, the loudest and most boastful, more so by far than any of your larger competition. You were the obvious choice."

"The luck of the Irish," Monahan had replied.

This was followed by more applause, and the "hear no evil" that inevitably followed Monahan's hands-over-ears pose, and seemed to signify to the pods a parting salutation.

Monahan was sure the story was a phony, but could think of nothing to do about it. So that's what he did.

The next day, by Monahan's measurements (he had slept twice so far), they had arrived. A mass of pods greeted them and long, spirited speeches were made. He was fed the same as on the spacecraft—canned food, stolen from Earth, no doubt, along with him.

He spent a night in a weird little room and that night was too short. And then he was transported in a round (or should he say podlike) vehicle to a weird garden.

Enormous flowers proliferated here. They waved above him in the sun.

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They seemed to whisper to each other about him as he passed beneath them, weaving his way through them on his way to his combat to the death. Were they alive? Of course they were alive. All flowers were alive, Monahan told himself, which is not what I'll be if I don't win this fight I've gone and got myself into with all my drunken boasts. And why not? Am I not an Irishman? Have I not the blood of Irish heroes throbbing in my veins?

He began to work himself up. Kind of pumping himself up with national fantasies and personal exaggerations. He noticed that the gravity was lighter here than on Earth and he began hopping up and down a bit to test it.

Definitely to my advantage. Just like old John Carter of Mars, by God *there* was an Irishman for you!

Suddenly for no good reason he bounded into the air, lost control and smashed into a giant flower stalk, which hurt, and toppled back down to the ground, which hurt again.

Then the full terror of the situation came shooting in on him. It was a tidal wave of simple truth:

I've never been in a fight in my entire life. I don't know how to fight and I don't *want* to know how to fight. I get drunk and boast about fighting because I'm afraid and I'm ashamed of being afraid. Because I don't want to ever be hurt. Because I don't want to ever hurt anyone else. Not ever.

And now just as suddenly his body was wracked with a strange form of convulsions he could not control. At first he thought he was laughing. Then he realized he was crying for all he was worth. Crying for everything wrong in his wasted life, crying for all the phony baloney macho lies that man perpetrates on himself the world over to convince himself that he is what he is not.

Mr. Deceptive Pod wobbled on his podestal. It was his way of expressing nervousness. He and Mr. Bad Seed were watching a 3V screen which showed them Mr. Monahan Trump, a huddled, passionately weeping figure on the flower forest floor.

"A gesture of courage," Mr. Bad Seed reassured him. "An old Earth custom. He weeps in anguish and will not be consoled until he has torn his enemy from limb to limb to limb to limb . . ."

"I am not so certain, Mr. Bad Seed. What if our plan fails? We have been paid many credits to produce this interplanetary 3V fight. We will be rich pods if it goes over. Flower pods are most vicarious violent beings. We all love a good fight if we're not in it. But what if Mr. Trump is a coward at heart, like us?"

Mr. Bad Seed bounced on his podestal angrily.

"*Earth beings,* cowards? Your name should be Mr. Foolish Pod. Earth

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beings are all crazy violent. They all drink alcohol to impede their reactions, then jump into vehicles that travel at high speed and have no safety factors, just to kill each other. They call this ritual 'Saturday night.' They spend millions of years to evolve their brains, then they put helmets on their children and encourage them to run head first into each other in order to steal a worthless little ball, which has been made out of a pig which they have mercilessly murdered in the most savage manner imaginable. Earth people cowards like us? No, Mr. Deceptive Pod, it is *your* contestant, Mr. Gruff, I am worried about."

"Then *your* name should be Mr. Foolish Pod instead of mine, Mr. Good Seed AKA Mr. Bad Seed. Mr. Gruff is as loud and boisterous as any Earth being. Did we not find him also in a bar, drunk and boasting? Do not worry about Mr. Gruff, he will tear your Earth being to pieces on our 3V interplanetary fight special. All of the credits it cost us to set this up will be paid back in full.

"Besides, I took the added precaution of supplying Mr. Gruff with a large bottle of alcohol. He assured me it would warm his blood and make him as ferocious as his heroic ancestors."

They changed channels on the 3V. A drunken shaggy being that superficially resembled a two-legged sheep dog was making its way clumsily toward the center of the garden. Monitors proliferated among the flowers. Mr. Gruff stopped, took another big slug from his bottle, staggered back and caught his balance and then howled like a dog.

Then he began to make whiney singsong noises, when suddenly he stood up straight and growled. But he began to back up at the same time.

He was being confronted by a scraggly dirty unkempt little Irishman, which was something he had never seen before. Like all his heroic ancestors, he was terrified of the unknown. He backed up a few more steps and fell whining onto his shaggy butt.

It was obvious to Monahan that things were going his way here. Mr. Gruff was either too drunk or too terrified to get up. Yes, Mr. Gruff was unlike anything Monahan had ever seen. But Monahan was certain he was drunk. Monahan was an expert of that condition.

Monahan took one step forward, hands held in a menacing pose he had stolen from photos he had seen of famous fighters. He took two steps forward, moving his hands in a threatening manner, but his heart just wasn't in it.

What if he's just now fallen down on his ass in fear and broken the only bottle on this planet?

He stopped in his tracks and held his hand out in a fist with the thumb up. Then he very explicitly put the thumb in his mouth, tilted his head back, and made drinking noises. He repeated his gesture.

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Mr. Gruff quit whining and tentatively held up the bottle. It was obviously made of some kind of rubbery unbreakable substance.

"Plastic, is it?" Monahan shouted. "God bless all things plastic."

He held out his hand and, swallowing back his fear in a worthy purpose, he advanced on Mr. Gruff and took the bottle from Gruff's paw and downed a huge draught.

"Oh, it's a worthy brew, it is," he said to Mr. Gruff after a brief period of coughing and shaking his head. "It's as noble a draught as any I've ever downed back on my own fair planet. And it's a huge bottle. A quart or more."

Mr. Gruff held out his pawlike hand. Soon the two beings were singing together, each in his own inimitable fashion, and after that the two drunken bums began to choreograph out a crude drunken dance, part of which resembled an Irish jig and part of which resembled nothing in the world that could be described to you.

A pattern was established that went on into the night. The two aliens drank, sang and, arm in arm, danced about the garden, monitored by many hidden cameras among the flowers, to a 3V audience of millions of bloodthirsty flower pods, until, finally exhausted, bottle empty, hearts full, our two heroes fell down and could get up no more—for sure to dream.

Mr. Bad Seed had his handy insect turn off the 3V and then, as an afterthought, off the 3V all the way. The insect, obviously too fragile for the job, expired during the effort of tossing the enormous set from the highest window (it had climbed the winding ramp with its tragic burden). But as such things go, a new insect cheerfully took its place, ready for action. P.T. Barnum was at least right part of the time.

"You can fool all of the pods all of the time," Mr. Bad Seed said, "and that includes the ones that are doing the fooling."

Mr. Deceptive Pod said nothing. He was envisioning himself being ground up into little pieces and sprinkled about some lonely garden as fertilizer, a distinct possible way to extrapolate his immediate future. The 3V communication center was buzzing like a hive of zorkos.

Resigned to his fate, Mr. Bad Seed approached it. "Greetings from Mr. Good Seed here, master of entertainment spectaculars unlimited. We hope you caught tonight's—uh—super spectacular coverage of—er—alien encounter, a program designed to—uh—dramatize the first meeting between alien beings in the spirit of universal friendship and—uh—"

"A musical?" the voice over the communicator suggested.

Mr. Good Seed zeroed in on the image of the pod transmitting. His features gave nothing away.

Mr. Deceptive Pod moved in. "Yes, a musical encounter between aliens. With a message of sharing and universal love. We wanted to bring to

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our world a totally unprecedented experience. We wanted to be the conscience of our world. We wanted to open up a new spirit for pods everywhere. A spirit of universal brotherhood. We, Mr. Good Seed and I, were willing to risk everything to do so."

As soon as he broke communication his set was buzzing again. More critics; no doubt. He let it buzz while he got his balance on his podestal.

"Do you think we can pull it off, Mr. Wicked Deceptive Crazy Pod? Ha ha ha, what scoundrels we both are! We can restage it, show it again, milk it for everything we can get. Start a religion. All we need to do is keep Trump and Gruff supplied with alcohol and we can tour the whole pod system. Can we really pull it off?"

"We can try," Mr. Deceptive Pod said. "As P.T. Barnum so aptly put it, you can sure fool all of the pods all of the time, including us." And the two devious pods plotted deep into the night. ●

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ORIGINAL RAYS

To live inside
  an explosion
—its deafening remains
Return to us in the dark
In whispers: "What's wrong?"
  "I can't sleep."

Light the lamp
& boil some water
Find the words revolving silently
Out of reach
  all the starry lattices
In our cells / contain the signs
For "love" and "fear"
  to live between
These blinding levels of activity
In the oscillating universe

Whose first three minutes made
  unbreakable codes
That hold a teacup together

Whose unfired specks of monobloc
  accrue as grit
That clogs the drain pipes

Whose first rays opened the sky
  and let in light
That beams across the tabletop

Attenuated
Stretched beyond their limits
The original relations hold
"Why are we here?" is best said:
  "What have we become?"

—Andrew Joron and Robert Frazier

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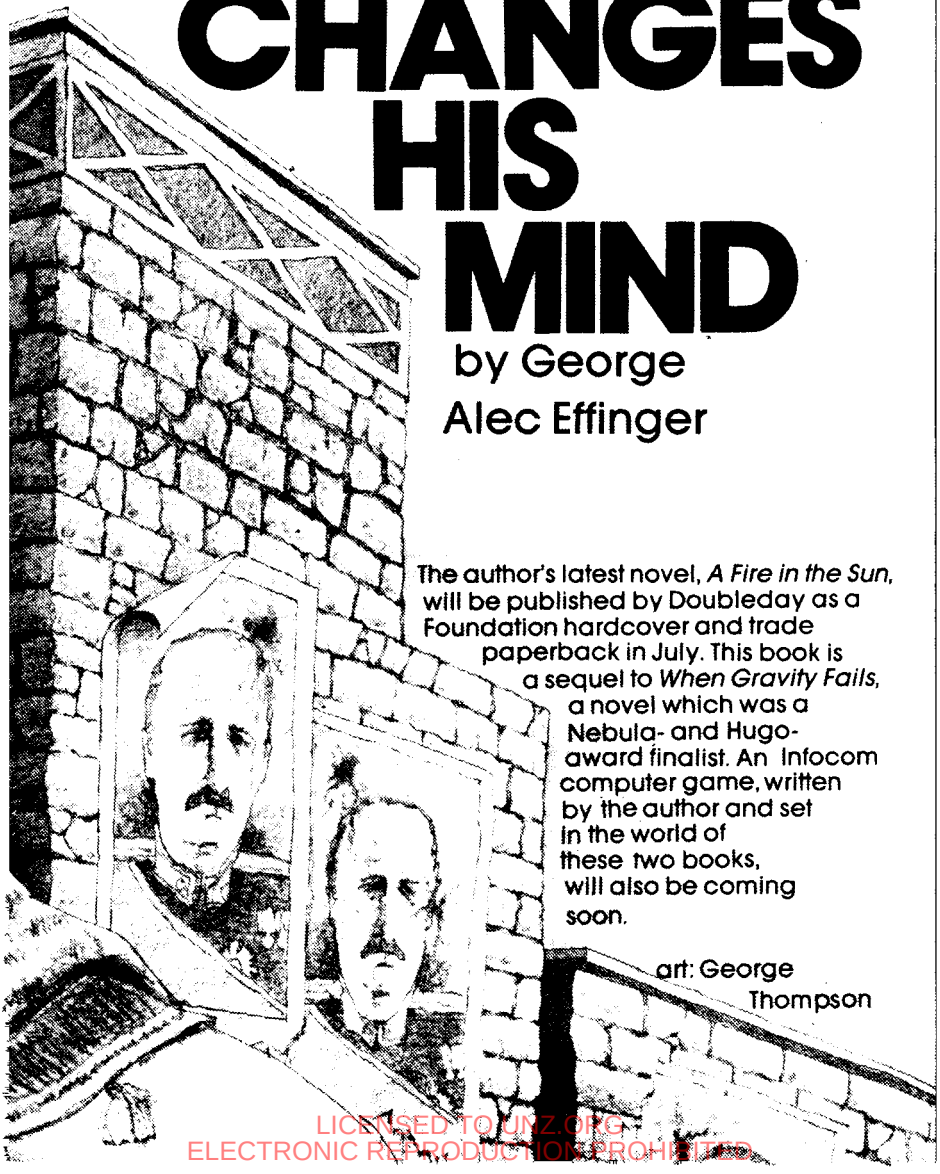
MARÎD CHANGES HIS MIND

by George Alec Effinger



The author's latest novel, *A Fire in the Sun*, will be published by Doubleday as a Foundation hardcover and trade paperback in July. This book is a sequel to *When Gravity Fails*, a novel which was a Nebula- and Hugo-award finalist. An Infocom computer game, written by the author and set in the world of these two books, will also be coming soon.

art: George Thompson

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We'd ridden for many days out the coast highway toward Mauretania, the part of Algeria where I'd been born. In that time, even at its lethargic pace, the broken-down old bus had carried us from the city to some town forsaken by Allah before it even learned what its name was. Centuries come, centuries go: In the Arab world they arrive and depart loaded on the roofs of shuddering, rattling buses that are more trouble to keep in service than the long parades of camels used to be. I remembered what those bus rides were like from when I was a kid, sitting or standing in the aisle with fifty other boys and men and maybe another two dozen clinging up on the roof. The buses passed by my home then. I saw turbaned heads, heads wearing fezes or knit caps, heads in white or checked *keffiyas*. All men. That was something I planned to ask my father about, if I ever met him. "O my father," I would say, "tell me why everyone on the bus is a man. Where are their women?"

And I always imagined that my father—I pictured him tall and lean with a fierce dark beard, a hawk or an eagle of a man; he was, in my vision, Arab, although I had my mother's word that he had been a Frenchman—I saw my father gazing thoughtfully into the bright sunlight, framing a careful reply to his young son. "O Marîd, my sweet one," he would say—and his voice would be deep and husky, issuing from the back of his throat as if he never used his lips to speak, although my mother said he wasn't like that at all—"Marîd, the women will come later. The men will send for them later."

"Ah," I would say. My father could pierce *all* riddles. I could not pose a question that he did not have a proper answer for. He was wiser than our village shaykh, more knowledgeable than the man whose face filled the posters pasted on the wall we were pissing on. "Father," I would ask him, "why are we pissing on this man's face?"

"Because it is idolatrous to put his face on such a poster, and it is fit only for a filthy alley like this, and therefore the Prophet, may the blessing of Allah be on him and peace, tells us that what we are doing to these images is just and right."

"And father?" I would always have one more question, and he'd always be blissfully patient. He would smile down at me, put one hand fondly behind my head. "Father? I have always wanted to ask you, what do you do when you are pissing and your bladder is so full it feels like it will explode before you can relieve it and while you are pissing, *just then,* the muezzin—"

Saied hit me hard in the left temple with the palm of his hand. "You sleeping out here?"

I looked up at him. There was glare everywhere. I couldn't remember where the hell we were. "Where the hell are we?" I asked him.

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He snorted. "*You're* the one from the Maghreb, the great, wild west. You tell me."

"Have we got to Algeria yet?" I didn't think so.

"No, stupid. I've been sitting in that goddamn little coffeehouse for three hours charming the warts off this fat fool. His name is Hisham."

"Where are we?

"Just crossed through Carthage. We're on the outskirts of Old Tunis now. So listen to me. What's the old guy's name?"

"Huh? I don't remember."

He hit me hard in the right temple with the palm of his other hand. I hadn't slept in two nights. I was a little confused. Anyway, he got the easy part of the job: Sitting around the bus stops, drinking mint tea with the local ringleaders and gossiping about the marauding Christians and the marauding Jews and the marauding heathen niggers and just in general being goddamn smooth; and I got the piss-soaked alleys and the flies. I couldn't remember why we divided this business up like that. After all, I was supposed to be in charge—it was my idea to find this woman, it was my trip, we were using my money. But Saied took the mint tea and the gossip, and I got—well, I don't have to go into that again.

We waited the appropriate amount of time. The sun was disappearing behind a western wall; it was almost time for the sunset call to prayer. I stared at Saied, who was now dozing. Good, I thought, now I get to hit *him* in the head. I had just gotten up and taken one little step, when he looked up at me. "It's time, I guess," he said, yawning. I nodded, didn't have anything to add. So I sat back down, and Saied the Half-Hajj went into his act.

Saied is a natural-born liar, and it's a pleasure to watch him hustle. He had the personality module he liked best plugged into his brain—his heavy-duty, steel-belted, mean mother of a tough-guy moddy. Nobody messed with the Half-Hajj when he was chipping that one in.

Back home in the city, Saied thought it was beneath him to earn money. He liked to sit in the cafés with me and Mahmoud and Jacques, all day and all evening. His little chicken, the American boy everybody called Abdul-Hassan, went out with older men and brought home the rent money. Saied liked to sneer a lot and wear his *gallebeya* cinched with a wide black leather belt, which was decorated with shiny chrome-steel strips and studs. The Half-Hajj was always careful of his appearance.

What he was doing in this vermin-infested roadside slum was what he called fun. I waited a few minutes and followed him around the corner and into the coffeehouse. I shuffled in, unkempt, filthy, and took a chair in a shadowy corner. The proprietor glanced at me, frowned, and turned

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back to Saied. Nobody ever paid any attention to me. Saied was finishing the tail-end of a joke I'd heard him tell a dozen times since we'd left the city. When he came to the payoff, the shopkeeper and the four other men at the long counter burst into laughter. They liked Saied. He could make people like him whenever he wanted. That talent was programmed into an add-on chip snapped into his bad-ass moddy. With the right moddy and the right daddy chips, it didn't matter where you'd been born or how you'd been raised. You could fit in with any sort of people, you could speak any language, you could handle yourself in any situation. The information was fed directly into your short-term memory. You could literally become another person, Ramses II or Buck Rogers in the 25th Century, until you popped the moddy and daddies out.

Saied was being rough and dangerous, but he was also being charming, if you can imagine that combination. I watched the shopowner reach and grab the teapot. He poured some into the Half-Hajj's glass, slopping some more on the wooden counter. Nobody moved to mop it up. Saied raised the glass to drink, then slammed it down again. *"Yaa salaam!"* he roared. He leaped up.

"What is it, O my friend?" asked Hisham, the proprietor.

"My ring!" Saied shouted. He was wearing a large gold ring, and he'd been waving it under the old man's nose for two solid hours. It had had a big, round diamond in its center.

"What's the matter with your ring?"

"Look for yourself! The stone—my diamond—it's gone!"

Hisham caught Saied's flapping arm and saw that, indeed, the diamond was now missing. "Must have fallen out," the old man said, with the sort of folk wisdom you find only in these petrified provincial villages.

"Yes, fallen out," said Saied, not calmed in the least. "But where?"

"Do you see it?"

Saied made a great show of searching the floor around his stool. "No, I'm sure it's not here," he said at last.

"Then it must be out in the alley. You must've lost it the last time you went out to piss."

Saied slammed the bar with his heavy fist. "And now it's getting dark, and I must catch the bus."

"You still have time to search," said Hisham. He didn't sound very confident.

The Half-Hajj laughed without humor. "A stone like that, worth four thousand Tunisian dinars, looks like a tiny pebble among a million others. In the twilight I'd never find it. What am I to do?"

The old man chewed his lip and thought for a moment. "You're determined to leave on the bus, when it passes through?" he asked.

"I must, O my brother. I have urgent business."

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"I'll help you if I can. Perhaps I can find the stone for you. You must leave your name and address with me; then if I find the diamond, I'll send it to you."

"May the blessings of Allah be on you and on your family!" said Saied. "I have little hope that you'll succeed, but it comforts me to know you will do your best for me. I'm in your debt. We must determine a suitable reward for you."

Hisham looked at Saied with narrowed eyes. "I ask no reward," he said slowly.

"No, of course not, but I insist on offering you one."

"No reward is necessary. I consider it my duty to help you, as a Muslim brother."

"Still," Saied went on, "should you find the wretched stone, I'll give you a thousand Tunisian dinars for the sustenance of your children and the ease of your aged parents."

"Let it be as you wish," said Hisham with a small bow.

"Here," said my friend, "let me write my address for you." While Saied was scribbling his name on a scrap of paper, I heard the rumbling of the bus as it lurched to a stop outside the building.

"May Allah grant you a good journey," said the old man.

"And may He grant you prosperity and peace," said Saied, as he hurried out to the bus.

I waited about three minutes. Now it was my turn. I stood up and staggered a couple of steps. I had a lot of trouble walking in a straight line. I could see the shopkeeper glaring at me in disgust. "The hell do you want, you filthy beggar?" he said.

"Some water," I said.

"Water! Buy something or get out!"

"Once a man asked the Messenger of God, may Allah's blessings be on him, what was the noblest thing a man may do. The reply was 'To give water to he who thirsts.' I ask this of you."

"Ask the Prophet. I'm busy."

I nodded. I didn't expect to get anything free to drink out of this crud. I leaned against his counter and stared at a wall. I couldn't seem to make the place stand still.

"*Now* what do you want? I told you to go away."

"Trying to remember," I said peevishly. "I had something to tell you. Ah, yes, I know." I reached into a pocket of my jeans and brought out a glittering round stone. "Is this what that man was looking for? I found this out there. Is this—?"

The old man tried to snatch it out of my hand. "Where'd you get that? The alley, right? *My* alley. Then it's mine."

"No, I found it. It's—"

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"He said he wanted me to look for it." The shopkeeper was already gazing into the distance, spending the reward money.

"He said he'd pay you money for it."

"That's right. Listen, I've got his address. Stone's no good to you without the address."

I thought about that for a second or two. "Yes, O Shaykh."

"And the address is no good to me without the stone. So here's my offer: I'll give you two hundred dinars for it."

"Two hundred? But he said—"

"He said he'd give me a thousand. *Me,* you drunken fool. It's worthless to you. Take the two hundred. When was the last time you had two hundred dinars to spend?"

"A long time."

"I'll bet. So?"

"Let me have the money first."

"Let me have the stone."

"The money."

The old man growled something and turned away. He brought a rusty coffee can up from under the counter. There was a thick wad of money in it, and he fished out two hundred dinars in old, worn bills. "Here you are, and damn your mother for a whore."

I took the money and stuffed it into my pocket. Then I gave the stone to Hisham. "If you hurry," I said, slurring my words despite the fact that I hadn't had a drink or any drugs all day, "you'll catch up with him. The bus hasn't left yet."

The man grinned at me. "Let me give you a lesson in shrewd business. The esteemed gentleman offered me a thousand dinars for a four-thousand dinar stone. Should I take the reward, or sell the stone for its full value?"

"Selling the stone will bring trouble," I said.

"Let me worry about that. Now you go to hell. I don't ever want to see you around here again."

He needn't worry about that. As I left the decrepit coffeehouse, I popped out the moddy I was wearing. I don't know where the Half-Hajj had gotten it; it had a Malaccan label on it, but I didn't think it was an over-the-counter piece of hardware. It was a dumbing-down moddy; when I chipped it in, it ate about half of my intellect and left me shambling, stupid, and just barely able to carry out my half of the plan. With it out, the world suddenly poured back into my consciousness, and it was like waking from a bleary, drugged sleep. I was always angry for half an hour after I popped that moddy. I hated myself for agreeing to wear it, I hated Saied for conning me into doing it, *He* wouldn't wear it, not the Half-Hajj and his precious self-image. So I wore it, even though I'm gifted

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with twice the intracranial modifications as anybody else around, enough daddy capacity to make me the most talented son of a bitch in creation. And still Saied persuaded me to damp myself out to the point of near-vegetability.

On the bus, I sat next to him, but I didn't want to talk to him or listen to him gloat.

"What'd we get for that chunk of glass?" he wanted to know. He'd already replaced the real diamond in his ring.

I just handed the money to him. It was his game, it was his score. I couldn't have cared less. I don't even know why I went along with him, except that he'd said he wouldn't come to Algeria with me unless I did.

He counted the bills. "Two hundred? That's all? We got more the last two times. Oh, well, what the hell—that's two hundred dinars more we can blow in Algiers. 'Come with me to the Kasbah.' Little do those gazelle-eyed boys know what's stealing toward them even now, through the lemon-scented night."

"This stinking bus, that's what, Saied."

He looked at me with wide eyes, then laughed. "You got no romance in you, Marîd," he said. "Ever since you had your brain wired, you been no fun at all."

"How about that." I didn't want to talk anymore. I pretended that I was going to sleep. I just closed my eyes and listened to the bus thumping and thudding over the broken pavement, with the unending arguments and laughter of the other passengers all around me. It was crowded and hot on that reeking bus, but it was carrying me hour by hour nearer to the solution of my own mystery. I had come to a point in my life where I needed to find out who I really was.

The bus stopped in the Barbary town of Annaba, and an old man with a grizzled gray beard came aboard selling apricot nectar. I got some for myself and some for the Half-Hajj. Apricots are the pride of Mauretania, and the juice was the first real sign that I was getting close to home. I closed my eyes and inhaled that delicate apricot aroma, then swallowed a mouthful of juice and savored the thick sweetness. Saied just gulped his down with a grunt and gave me a blunt "Thanks." The guy's got all the refinement of a dead bat.

The road angled south, away from the dark, invisible coast toward the city of Constantine. Although it was getting late, almost midnight, I told Saied that I wanted to get off the bus and grab some supper. I hadn't eaten anything since noon. Constantine is built on a high limestone bluff, the only ancient town in eastern Algeria to survive through centuries of foreign invasions. The only thing I cared about, though, was food. There is a local dish in Constantine called *chorba beida bel kefta,* a meatball soup made with onions, pepper, chickpeas, almonds, and cin-

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namon. I hadn't tasted it in at least fifteen years, and I didn't care if it meant missing the bus and having to wait until tomorrow for another, I was going to have some. Saied thought I was crazy.

I had my soup, and it was wonderful. Saied just watched me wordlessly and sipped a glass of tea. We got back on the bus in time. I felt good now, comfortably full and warmed by a nostalgic glow. I took the window seat, hoping that I'd be able to see some familiar landscape as we passed through Jijel and Mansouria. Of course, it was as black as the inside of my pocket beyond the glass, and I saw nothing but the moon and the fiercely twinkling stars. Still, I pretended to myself that I could make out landmarks that meant I was drawing closer to Algiers, the city where I had spent a lot of my childhood.

When at last we pulled into Algiers sometime after sunrise, the Half-Hajj shook me awake. I didn't remember falling asleep. I felt terrible. My head felt like it had been crammed full of sharp-edged broken glass, and I had a pinched nerve in my neck, too. I took out my pill case and stared into it for a while. Did I prefer to make my entrance into Algiers hallucinating, narcotized, or somnambulant? It was a difficult decision. I went for pain-free but conscious, so I fished out eight tabs of Sonneine. The sunnies obliterated my headache—and every other mildly unpleasant sensation—and I more or less floated from the bus station in Mustapha to a cab.

"You're stoned," said Saied when we got to the back of the taxi. I told the driver to take us to a public data library.

"Me? Stoned? When have you ever known me to be stoned so early in the morning?"

"Yesterday. The day before yesterday. The day before that."

"I mean *except* for then. I function better with a ton of opiates in me than most people do straight."

"Sure you do."

I stared out the taxi's window. "Anyway," I said, "I've got a rack of daddies that can compensate."

"Marîd Audran, Silicon Superman."

"Look," I said, annoyed by Saied's attitude, "for a long time I was terrified of getting wired, but now I don't know how I ever got along without it."

"Then why the hell are you still decimating your brain cells with drugs?" asked the Half-Hajj.

"Call me old-fashioned. Besides, when I pop the daddies out, I feel terrible. All that suppressed fatigue and pain hit me at once."

"And you don't get paybacks with your sunnies and beauties, right? That what you're saying?"

"Shut up, Saied. Why the hell are you so concerned all of a sudden?"

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He looked at me sideways and smiled. "The religion has this ban on liquor and hard drugs, you know." And this coming from the Half-Hajj who, if he'd ever been inside a mosque in his life, was there only to check out the boys' school.

So in ten or fifteen minutes the cab driver let us out at the library. I felt a peculiar nervous excitement, although I didn't understand why. All I was doing was climbing the granite steps of a public building; why should I be so wound up? I tried to occupy my mind with more pleasant thoughts.

Inside, there were a number of terminals vacant. I sat down at the gray screen of a battered Bab el-Marifi. It asked me what sort of search I wanted to conduct. The machine's voice synthesizer had been designed in one of the North American republics, and it was having a lot of trouble pronouncing Arabic. I said, "Name," then "Enter." When the cursor appeared again, I said, "Monroe comma Angel." The data deck thought about that for a while, then white letters began flicking across its bright face:

Angel Monroe
16, Rue du Sahara
(Upper) Kasbah
Algiers
Mauretania
04-B-28

I had the machine print out the address. The Half-Hajj raised his eyebrows at me and I nodded. "Looks like I'm gonna get some answers."

"Inshallah," murmured Saied. If God wills.

We went back out into the hot, steamy morning to find another taxi. It didn't take long to get from the library to the Kasbah. There wasn't as much traffic as I remembered from my childhood—not vehicular traffic, anyway; but there were still the slow, unavoidable battalions of heavily-laden donkeys being cajoled through the narrow streets.

Number 16 was an exhausted, crumbling brick pile with two bulging upper stories that hung out over the cobbled street. The apartment house across the way did the same, and the two buildings almost kissed above my head, like two dowdy old matrons leaning across a back fence. There was a jumble of mailslots, and I found Angel Monroe's name scrawled on a card in fading ink. I jammed my thumb on her buzzer. There was no lock on the front door, so I went in and climbed the first flight of stairs. Saied was right behind me.

Her apartment turned out to be on the third floor, in the rear. The hallway was carpeted, if that's the right word, with a dull, gritty fabric

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that had at one time been maroon. The traffic of uncountable feet had completely worn through the material in many places, so that the dry gray wood of the floor was visible through the holes. The walls were covered with a filthy tan wallpaper, hanging down here and there in forlorn strips. The air had an odd, sour tang to it, as if the building were occupied by people who had come there to die, or who were certainly sick enough to die but instead hung on in lonely misery. From behind one door I could hear a family battle, complete with bellowed threats and crashing crockery, while from another apartment came insane, high-pitched laughter and the sound of flesh loudly smacking flesh. I didn't want to know about it.

I stood outside the shabby door to Angel Monroe's flat and took a deep breath. I glanced at the Half-Hajj, but he just gave me a shrug and pointedly looked away. Some friend. I was on my own. I told myself that nothing weird was going to happen—a lie just to get myself to take the next step—and then I knocked on the door. There was no response. I waited a few seconds and knocked again, louder. This time I heard the rattle and squeak of bedsprings and the sound of someone coming slowly to the door. The door swung open. Angel Monroe stared out, trying very hard to focus her eyes.

She was a full head shorter than me, with bleached blonde hair curled tightly into an arrangement I would call "ratty." Her black roots looked as if no one had given them much attention since the Prophet's birthday. Her eyes were banded with dark blue and black makeup, in a manner that brought to mind the more colorful Mediterranean saltwater fish. The rouge she wore was applied liberally, but not quite in the right places, so she didn't look so much wantonly sexy as she did feverishly ill. Her lipstick, for reasons best known to Allah and Angel Monroe, was a kind of pulpy purple color; her lips looked like she'd bought them first and forgot to put them in the refrigerator while she shopped for the rest of her face.

Her body led me to believe that she was too old to be dressed in anything but the long white Algerian *haik*, with a veil conservatively and firmly in place. The problem was that this body had never seen the inside of a *haik*. She was clad now in shorts so small that her well-rounded belly was bending the waistband over. Her sagging breasts were not quite clothed in a kind of gauzy vest. I knew for certain that if she sat in a chair, you could safely hide the world's most valuable gem in her navel and it would be completely invisible. Her legs were patterned with broken veins like the dry *chebka* valleys of the Mzab. On her broad, flat feet she wore tattered slippers with the remains of pink fuzzy bows dangling loose.

To tell the truth, I felt a certain disgust. "Angel Monroe?" I asked. Of course, that wasn't her real name. She was at least half Berber, as I am.

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Her skin was darker than mine, her eyes as black and dull as eroded asphalt.

"Uh huh," she said. "Kind of early, ain't it?" Her voice was sharp and shrill. She was already very drunk. "Who sent you? Did Khalid send you? I told that goddamn bastard I was sick. I ain't supposed to be working today, I told him last night. He said it was all right. And then he sends you. *Two* of you, yet. Who the hell does he think I am? And it ain't like he don't have no other girls, either. He could have sent you to Efra, that whore, with her plug-in talent. If I ain't feeling good, it don't bother me if he sends you to her. Hell, I don't care. How much you give him, anyway?"

I stood there, looking at her. Saied gave me a jab in the side. "Well, uh, Miss Monroe," I said, but then she started chattering again.

"The hell with it. Come on in. I guess I can use the money. But you tell that son of a bitch Khalid that—" She paused to take a long gulp from the tall glass of whiskey she was holding. "You tell him if he don't care enough about my health, I mean, making me work when I already told him I was sick, then hell, you tell him there are plenty of others I can go work for. Anytime I want to, you can believe that."

I tried twice to interrupt her, but I didn't have any success. I waited until she stopped to take another drink. While she had her mouth full of the cheap liquor, I said, "Mother?"

She just stared at me for a moment, her filmy eyes wide. "No," she said at last, in a small voice. She looked closer. Then she dropped her whiskey glass to the floor.

2.

Later, after the return trip from Algiers and Mauretania, when I got back home to the city, the first place I headed was the Budayeen. I used to live right in the heart of the walled quarter, but events and fate and Friedlander Bey had made that impossible now. I used to have a lot of friends in the Budayeen too, and I was welcome anywhere; but now there were really only two people who were generally glad to see me: Saied the Half-Hajj, and Chiriga, who ran a club on the Street halfway between the big stone arch and the cemetery. Chiri's place had always been my home-away-from-home, where I could sit and have a few drinks in peace, hear the gossip, and not get threatened or hustled by the working girls.

Chiri's a hard-working woman, a tall black African with ritual facial scars and sharply filed cannibal teeth. To be honest, I don't really know if those canines of hers are mere decoration, like the patterns on her forehead and cheeks, or a sign that dinner at her house was composed

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of delicacies implicitly and explicitly forbidden by the noble Qur'ân. Chiri's a moddy, but she thinks of herself as a smart moddy. At work, she's always herself. She chips in her fantasies at home, where she won't bother anyone else. I respect that.

When I came through the club's door, I was struck first by a welcome wave of cool air. Her air-conditioning, as undependable as all old Russian-made hardware is, was working for a change. I felt better already. Chiri was deep in conversation with a customer, some bald guy with a bare chest. He was wearing black vinyl pants with the look of real leather, and his left hand was handcuffed behind him to his belt. He had a corymbic implant on the crest of his skull, and a pale green plastic moddy was feeding him somebody else's personality. If Chiri was giving him the time of day, then he couldn't have been dangerous, and probably he wasn't even all that obnoxious.

Chiri didn't have much patience with the crowd she caters to. Her philosophy is that *somebody* has to sell them liquor and drugs, but that doesn't mean she has to socialize with them.

"*Jambo,* Bwana Marîd!" Chiriga called to me when she noticed that I was sitting nearby. She left the handcuffed moddy and drifted slowly down her bar, plopping a cork coaster in front of me. "You come to share your wealth with this poor savage. In my native land, my people have nothing to eat and wander many miles in search of water. Here I have found peace and plenty. I have learned what friendship is. I have found disgusting men who would touch the hidden parts of my body. You will buy me drinks and leave me a huge tip. You will tell all your new friends about my place, and they will come in and want to touch the hidden parts of my body. I will own many shiny, cheap things. It is all as God wills."

I stared at her for a few seconds. Sometimes it's hard to figure what kind of mood Chiri's in. "Big nigger girl talk dumb," I said at last.

She grinned and dropped her ignorant Dinka act. "Yeah, you right," she said. "What is it today?"

"Gin and bingara," I said. I usually have that over ice with a little Rose's lime juice. The drink is my own invention, but I've never gotten around to naming it. Other times I have vodka gimlets, because that's what Philip Marlowe drinks in *The Long Goodbye.* Then on those occasions when I just really want to get loaded fast, I drink from Chiri's private stock of *tende,* a truly loathsome African liquor from the Sudan or the Congo or someplace, made, I think, from fermented yams and spadefoot toads. If you are ever offered *tende,* DO NOT TASTE IT. You *will* be sorry. Allah knows that I am.

Indihar was dancing on stage. She was a real girl with a real personality, a rarity in that club. Chiri seemed to prefer in her employees the

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high-velocity prettiness of a sexchange. Chiri told me once that changes take better care of their appearance. Their pre-fab beauty is their whole life. Allah forbid that a single hair of their eyebrows should be out of place.

By her own standards, Indihar was a good Muslim woman. She didn't have the head-wiring that most dancers had. The more conservative imams taught that the implants fell under the same prohibition as intoxicants, because some people got their pleasure centers wired and spent the remainder of their short lives amp-addicted. Even if, as in my case, the pleasure center is left alone, the use of a moddy submerges your own personality, and that is interpreted as insobriety. Needless to say, while I have nothing but the warmest affection for Allah and His Messenger, I stop short of being a fanatic about it. I'm with that twentieth century King Saud who demanded that the Islamic leaders of his country stop dragging their feet when it came to technological progress. I don't see any essential conflict between modern science and a thoughtful approach to religion.

"So," said Chiri, trying to make conversation, "how did your trip turn out? Did you find whatever you were looking for?"

I looked at her, but didn't say anything. I wondered if I *had* found it. When I saw her again in Algiers, my mother's appearance had shocked me. In my imagination, I'd pictured her as a respectable, moderately well-to-do matron living in a comfortable neighborhood. I hadn't seen or spoken to her in years, but I just figured she'd managed to lift herself out of the poverty and degradation. Now I thought maybe she was happy as she was, a haggard, strident old whore. I spent an hour with her, hoping to hear what I'd come to learn, trying to decide how to behave toward her, and being embarrassed by her in front of the Half-Hajj. She didn't want to be troubled by her past. She didn't like me dropping back into her life after all those years.

"Believe me," I told her, "I didn't like hunting you up, either. I only did it because I have to."

"Why do you have to?" she wanted to know. She reclined on a musty-smelling, torn old sofa that was covered with cat hair. She'd made herself another drink, but had neglected to offer me or Saied anything.

"It's important to me," I said. I told her about my life in the faraway city, how I'd lived as a subsonic hustler until Friedlander Bey had chosen me as the instrument of his will.

"You live in the city now?" She said that with a nostalgic longing. I never knew she'd been to the city.

"I lived in the Budayeen," I said, "but Friedlander Bey moved me into his palace."

"You work for him?"

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"I had no choice." I shrugged. She nodded. It surprised me that she knew who Papa was, too.

"So what did you come for?"

That was going to be hard to explain. "I wanted to find out everything I could about my father."

She looked at me over the rim of her whiskey glass. "You already heard everything," she said.

"I don't think so. How sure are you that this French sailor was my dad?"

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "His name was Bernard Audran. We met in a coffeeshop. I was living in Sidi Bel Abbès then. He took me to dinner, we liked each other. I moved in with him. We came to live in Algiers after that, and we were together for a year and a half. Then after you was born, one day he just left. I never heard from him again. I don't know where he went."

"*I* do. Into the ground, that's where. Took me a long time, but I traced Algerian computer records back far enough. There was a Bernard Audran in the navy of Provence, and he was in Mauretania when the French Confederate Union tried to regain control over us. The problem is that his brains were bashed out by some unidentified *noraf* more than a year before I was born. Maybe you could think back and see if you can get a clearer picture of those events."

That made her furious. She jumped up and flung her half-full glass of liquor at me. It smashed into the already stained and streaked wall to my right. I could smell the pungent, undiluted sharpness of the Irish whiskey. I heard Saied murmuring something beside me, maybe a prayer. My mother took a couple of steps toward me, her face ugly with rage. "You calling me a *liar?*" she shrieked.

Well, I was. "I'm just telling you that the official records say something different."

"Fuck the official records!"

"The records also say that you were married seven times in two years. No mention of any divorces."

My mother's anger faltered a bit. "How did that get in the computers? I never got officially married, not with no license or nothing."

"I think you underestimate the government's talent for keeping track of people. It's all there for anybody to see."

Now she looked frightened. "What else'd you find out?"

I let her off her own hook. "Nothing else. There wasn't anything more. You want something else to stay buried, you don't have to worry." That was a lie; I had learned plenty more about my mom.

"Good," she said, relieved. "I don't like you prying into what I done. It don't show respect."

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I had an answer to that, but I didn't use it. "What started all this nostalgic research," I said in a quiet voice, "was some business I was taking care of for Papa." Everybody in the Budayeen calls Friedlander Bey "Papa." It's an affectionate token of terror. "This police lieutenant who handled matters in the Budayeen died, so Papa decided that we needed a kind of public-affairs officer, somebody to keep communications open between him and the police department. He asked me to take the job."

Her mouth twisted. "Oh yeah? You got a gun now? You got a badge?" It was from my mother that I learned my dislike for cops.

"Yeah," I said, "I got a gun *and* a badge."

"Your badge ain't any good in Algiers, *salaud*."

"They give me professional courtesy wherever I go." I didn't even know if that was true here. "The point is, while I was deep in the cop comp, I took the opportunity to read my own file and a few others. The funny thing was, my name and Friedlander Bey's kept popping up together. And not just in the records of the last few years. I counted at least eight entries—hints, you understand, but nothing definite—that suggested the two of us were blood kin." That got a loud reaction from the Half-Hajj; maybe I should have told him about all this before.

"So?" said my mother.

"The hell kind of answer is that? So what does it mean? You ever jam Friedlander Bey, back in your golden youth?"

She looked raving mad again. "Hell, I jammed *lots* of guys. You expect me to remember all of them? I didn't even remember what they looked like while I was jamming them."

"You didn't want to get involved, right? You just wanted to be good friends. Were you ever friends enough to give credit? Or did you always ask for the cash up front?"

"Maghrebi," cried Saied, "this is your *mother!*" I didn't think it was possible to shock him.

"Yeah, it's my mother. Look at her."

She crossed the room in three steps, reached back, and gave me a hard slap across the face. It made me fall back a step. "Get the fuck *out* of here!" she yelled.

I put my hand to my cheek and glared at her. "You answer one thing first: Could Friedlander Bey be my real father?"

Her hand was poised to deliver another clout. "Yeah, he could be, the way practically *any* man could be. Go back to the city and climb up on his knee, sonny boy. I don't ever want to see you around here again."

She could rest easy on that score. I turned my back on her and left that repulsive hole in the wall. I didn't bother to shut the door on the way out. The Half-Hajj did, and then he hurried to catch up with me. I

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was storming down the stairs. "Listen, Marîd," he said. Until he spoke, I didn't realize how wild I was. "I guess all this is a big surprise to you—"

"You do? You're very perceptive today, Saied."

"—but you can't act that way toward your mother. Remember what it says—"

"In the Qur'ân? Yeah, I know. Well, what does the Straight Path have to say about prostitution? What does it have to say about the kind of degenerate my holy mother has turned into?"

"You've got a lot of room to talk. If there was a cheaper hustler in the Budayeen, I never met him."

I smiled coldly. "Thanks a lot, Saied, but I don't live in the Budayeen anymore. You forget? And I don't hustle anybody or anything. I got a steady job."

He spat at my feet. "You used to do nearly anything to make a few kiam."

"Anyway, just because I used to be the scum of the earth, it doesn't make it all right for my mother to be scum too."

"Why don't you just shut up about her? I don't want to hear about it."

"Your empathy just grows and grows, Saied," I said. "You don't know everything I know. My alma mater back there was into renting herself to strangers long before she had to support the two of us. She wasn't the forlorn heroine she always said she was. She glossed over a lot of the truth."

The Half-Hajj looked me hard in the eye for a few seconds. "Yeah?" he said. "Half the girls, changes, and debs we know do the same thing, and you don't have any problem treating *them* like human beings."

I was about to say "Sure, but none of them is my mother." I stopped myself. He would have jumped on that sentiment too, and besides, it was starting to sound foolish even to me. The edge of my anger had vanished. I think I was just greatly annoyed to have to learn these things after so many years. It was hard for me to accept. I mean, now I had to forget almost everything I thought I knew about myself. For one thing, I'd always been proud of the fact that I was half-Berber and half-French. I dressed in European style most of the time—boots and jeans and work shirts. I suppose I'd always felt a little superior to the Arabs I lived among. Now I had to get used to the thought that I could very well be half-Berber and half-Arab.

The raucous, thumping sound of mid-twenty-first century hispo roc from Chiri's jukebox broke into my daydream. Some forgotten band was growling an ugly chant about some damn thing or other. I've never gotten around to learning any Spanish dialects, and I don't own a Spanish-language daddy. If I ever run into any Colombian industrialists, they can just damn well speak Arabic. I have a soft spot in my liver for them

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because of their production of narcotics, but outside of that I don't see what South America is for. The world doesn't need an overpopulated, starving, Spanish-speaking India in the Western Hemisphere. Spain, their mother country, tried Islam and said a polite no-thank-you, and their national character sublimed right off into nothingness. That's Allah punishing them.

I was bored as hell. I knocked back the rest of my drink. Chiri looked at me and raised her eyebrows. "No, thanks, Chiri," I said. "I got to go."

She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. "Well, don't be a stranger now that you're a fascist swine cop."

"Right," I said. I got up from my stool. It was time to go to work. I left the rest of my change for Chiri's hungry register and went back outside.

3.

There was always a crowd of young children outside the station house on Walid al-Akbar Street. I don't know if they were hoping to see some shackled criminal dragged in, or waiting for their own parents to be released from custody, or just loitering in the hopes of begging loose change. I'd been one of them myself not so very long ago in Algiers, and it didn't hurt me any to throw a few kiam into the air and watch them scramble for it. I reached into my pocket and grabbed a clutch of coins. The older, bigger kids caught the easy money, and the smaller ones clung to my legs and wailed, *"Baksheesh!"* Every day it was a challenge to shake my young passengers loose before I got to the revolving door.

I had a desk in a small cubicle on the third floor of the station house. My cubicle was separated from its neighbors by pale green plasterboard walls only a little taller than I was. There was always a sour smell in the air, a mixture of stale sweat, tobacco smoke, and disinfectant. Above my desk was a shelf that held plastic boxes filled with dated files on cobalt-alloy cell-memories. On the floor was a big cardboard box crammed with bound printouts. I had a grimy Annamese data deck on my desk that gave me trouble-free operation on two out of every three jobs. Of course, my work wasn't very important, not according to Lieutenant Hajjar. We both knew I was there just to keep an eye on things for Friedlander Bey. It amounted to Papa having his own private police precinct devoted to protecting his interests in the Budayeen.

Hajjar came into my cubicle and dropped another heavy box on my desk. He was a Jordanian who'd had a lengthy arrest record of his own before he came to the city. I suppose he'd been an athlete ten years ago, but he hadn't stayed in shape. He had thinning brown hair and lately he'd tried to grow a beard. It looked terrible, like the skin of a kiwi fruit.

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He looked like a mother's bad dream of a drug dealer, which is what he was when he wasn't administering the affairs of the nearby walled quarter.

"How you doin', Audran?" he said.

"Okay," I said. "What's all this?"

"Found something useful for you to do." Hajjar was about two years younger than me, and it gave him a kick to boss me around.

I looked in the box. There were a couple of hundred blue cobalt-alloy plates. It looked like another really tedious job. "You want me to sort these?"

"I want you to log 'em all into the daily record."

I swore under my breath. Every cop carries an electronic log book to make notes on the day's tour: Where he went, what he saw, what he said, what he did. At the end of the day, he turns in the book's cell-memory plate to his sergeant. Now Hajjar wanted me to collate all the plates from the station's roster. "This isn't the kind of work Papa had in mind for me," I said.

"What the hell. You got any complaints, take 'em to Friedlander Bey. In the meantime, do what I tell you."

"Yeah, you right," I said. I glared at Hajjar's back as he walked out.

"By the way," he said, turning toward me again, "I got someone for you to meet later. It may be a nice surprise."

I doubted that. "Uh huh," I said.

"Yeah, well, get movin' on those plates. I want 'em finished by lunchtime."

I turned back to my desk, shaking my head. Hajjar annoyed the hell out of me. What was worse, he knew it. I didn't like giving him the satisfaction of seeing me irked.

I selected a productivity moddy from my rack and chipped it onto my posterior plug. The rear implant functions the same as everybody else's. It lets me chip in a moddy and six daddies. The anterior plug, however, is my own little claim to fame. This is the one that taps into my hypothalamus and lets me chip in my special daddies. As far as I know, no one else has ever been given a second implant. I'm glad I hadn't known that Friedlander Bey told my doctors to try something experimental and insanely dangerous. I guess he didn't want me to worry. Now that the frightening part is over, though, I'm glad I went through it. It's made me a more productive member of society and all that.

When I had boring policework to do, which was almost every day, I chipped in an orange moddy that Hajjar had given me. It had a label that said it was manufactured in Helvetia. The Swiss, I suppose, have a high regard for efficiency. Their moddy could take the most energetic, inspired person in the world and transform him instantly into a drudge.

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Not into a stupid drudge, like what the Half-Hajj's dumbing-down hardware did to me, but into a mindless worker who isn't aware enough to be distracted before the whole assignment is in the Out box. It's the greatest gift to the office menial since conjugal coffee breaks.

I sighed and took the moddy, then reached up and chipped it in.

The immediate sensation was as if the whole world had lurched and then caught its balance. There was an odd, metallic taste in Audran's mouth and a high-pitched ringing in his ears. He felt a touch of nausea, but he tried to ignore it because it wouldn't go away until he popped the moddy out. The moddy had trimmed down his personality like the wick of a lamp, until there was only a vague and ineffectual vestige of his true self left.

Audran wasn't conscious enough even to be resentful. He remembered only that he had work to do, and he pulled a double handful of cobalt-alloy plates out of the box. He slotted six of them into the adit ports beneath the battered data deck's comp screen. Audran touched the control pad and said, "Copy ports one, two, three, four, five, six." Then he stared blankly while the deck recorded the contents of the plates. When the run was finished, he removed the plates, stacked them on one side of the desk, and loaded in six more. He barely noticed the morning pass as he logged in the records.

"Audran." Someone was saying his name.

He stopped what he was doing and glanced over his shoulder. Lieutenant Hajjar and a uniformed patrolman were standing in the entrance to his cubicle. Audran turned slowly back to the data deck. He reached into the box, but it was empty.

"Unplug that goddamn thing."

Audran faced Hajjar again and nodded. It was time to pop the moddy.

There was a dizzy swirl of disorientation, and then I was sitting at my desk, staring stupidly at the Helvetian moddy in my hand. "Jeez," I murmured. It was a relief to be fully conscious again.

"Tell you a secret about Audran," Hajjar said to the cop. "We didn't hire him because of his wonderful qualities. He really don't have any. But he makes a great spindle for hardware. Audran's just a moddy's way of gettin' its daily workout." The cop smiled.

"Hey, you gave me this goddamn moddy in the first place," I said.

Hajjar shrugged. "Audran, this is Officer Shaknahyi."

"Where you at?" I said.

"All right," said the cop.

"You got to watch out for Audran," Hajjar said. "He's got one of those addictive personalities. He used to make a big deal out of not havin' his

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brain wired. Now you never see him without some kind of moddy stuck in his head."

That shocked me. I hadn't realized I'd been using my moddies so much. I was surprised anyone else had noticed.

"Try to overlook his frailties, Jirji, 'cause you and him are gonna be workin' together."

Shaknahyi gave him a sharp look. I did the same. "What do you mean, 'working together'?" said the cop.

"I mean what I said. I got a little assignment for you two. You're gonna be workin' very closely for a while."

"You taking me off the street?" asked Shaknahyi.

Hajjar shook his head. "I never said that. I'm pairin' Audran with you on patrol."

Shaknahyi was so outraged, I thought he was going to split down the middle. "Shaitan take my kids first!" he said. "You think you're teaming me up with a guy with no training and no experience, you're goddamn crazy!"

I didn't like the idea of going out on the street. I didn't want to make myself a target for every loon in the Budayeen who owned a cheap needle gun. "I'm supposed to stay here in the station house," I said. "Friedlander Bey never said anything about real cop work."

"Be good for you, Audran," said Hajjar. "You can ride around and see all your old buddies again. They'll be impressed when you flash your badge at them."

"They'll hate my guts," I said.

"You're both overlooking one small detail," said Shaknahyi. "As my partner, he's supposed to guard my back every time we walk into some dangerous situation. To be honest, I don't have a lick of faith in him. You can't expect me to work with a partner I don't trust."

"I don't blame you," said Hajjar. He looked amused by the cop's opinion of me. My first impression of Shaknahyi wasn't so good, either. He didn't have his brain wired, and that meant he was one of two kinds of cop: Either he was a strict Muslim, or else he was one of those guys who thought his own naked, unaugmented brain was more than a match for the evildoers. That's the way I used to be, but I learned better. Either way, I wouldn't get along with him.

"And I don't want the responsibility of watching his back," I said. "I don't need that kind of pressure."

Shaknahyi didn't want any part of it. "I wanted to be a cop because I thought I could help people," he said. "I don't make a lot of money, I don't get enough sleep, and every day I mix into one goddamn crisis after another. I never know when somebody's gonna pull a gun on me and use it. I do it because I believe I can make a difference. I didn't sign on to

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babysit Friedlander Bey's protégé." He glowered at Hajjar until the lieutenant had to look away.

"Listen," I said to Shaknahyi, "what's your problem with me?"

"You're not a cop, for one thing," he said. "You're worse than a rookie. You'll hang back and let some creep nail me, or else you'll get itchy and shoot a little old lady. I don't want to be teamed with somebody unless I think I can count on him."

I nodded. "Yeah, you right, but I can wear a moddy. I've seen plenty of rookies wearing police officer moddies to help them through the routines."

Shaknahyi threw up his hands. "He just makes it worse," he muttered.

"Get used to it," said Hajjar, " 'cause you don't have a choice."

Shaknahyi rubbed his forehead and sighed. "All right, all right. I just wanted to have my objection on the record."

"Okay," said Hajjar, "it's been noted."

"Want us to start right away?" I asked.

Hajjar gave me a wry look. "If you can fit it into your busy social calendar."

"Fine," I said.

"Right," said Shaknahyi, walking out of my cubicle.

"You two didn't hit it off real well," said Hajjar.

"We just have to get the job done," I said. "We don't have to go dancing together."

"Yeah, you right." And then he turned and left me alone too.

4.

A few days later, Friedlander Bey sent a message that he'd like to speak with me, and he invited me to have supper with him afterward. I went into my bedroom and undressed. Then I took a quick shower and thought about what I wanted to say to Friedlander Bey. I wanted to let him know that I wasn't happy about being teamed with Officer Shaknahyi.

I got out of the shower and toweled myself dry. Then I stared into a closet for a while, deciding what to wear. Papa liked it when I wore Arab dress. I figured what the hell and picked a simple maroon *gallebeya*. I decided that the knitted skullcap of my homeland wasn't appropriate, and I'm not the turban type. I settled on a plain white *keffiya* and fixed it in place with a simple black rope *akal*. I tied a corded belt around my waist, supporting a ceremonial dagger Papa'd given me. Also on the belt, pulled around behind my back, was a holster with my seizure gun. I hid that by wearing an expensive tan-colored cloak over the *gallebeya*. I felt

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I was ready for anything: A feast, a debate, or an attempted assassination.

Papa's offices were on the ground floor in the main part of the house connecting the two wings. When I got there, one of the Stones That Speak, Friedlander Bey's twin giants, was in the corridor, guarding the door. He glanced at me and nodded, and bowed his head slightly as I went past him into Papa's waiting room. Then he closed the door behind me. Friedlander Bey was in his inner office. He was sitting behind his gigantic desk. He didn't look well. His elbows were on the desktop, and his head was in his hands. He was massaging his forehead. He stood up when I came in. "I am pleased," he said. He didn't sound pleased. He sounded exhausted.

"It's my honor to wish you good evening, O Shaykh," I said. He was wearing an open-necked white shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a pair of baggy gray trousers. He probably wouldn't even notice the trouble I'd taken to dress conservatively. You can't win, right?

"We will dine soon, my son. In the meantime, sit with me. There are matters that need our attention."

I sat in a comfortable chair beside his desk. Papa took his seat again and fiddled with some papers, frowning. It wasn't my place to question him. He'd begin when he was ready.

He shut his eyes for a moment and then opened them, sighing. His sparse white hair was rumpled, and he hadn't shaved that morning. I guessed he had a lot on his mind. I was a little afraid of what he was going to order me to do this time.

"We must speak," he said. "There is the matter of alms-giving."

Okay, I'll admit it: Of all the possible problems he could have chosen, alms-giving was pretty low on my list of what I expected to hear. How foolish of me to think he wanted to discuss something more to the point. Like murder.

"I'm afraid I've had more important things on my mind, O Shaykh," I said.

Friedlander Bey nodded wearily. "No doubt, my son, you truly believe these other things are more important, but you are wrong. You and I share an existence of luxury and comfort, and that gives us a responsibility to our brothers."

Jacques, my infidel friend, would've had trouble grasping his precise point. Sure, other religions are all in favor of charity too. It's just good sense to take care of the poor and needy, because you never know when you're going to end up poor and needy yourself. The Muslim attitude goes further, though. Alms-giving is one of the five pillars of the religion, as fundamental an obligation as the profession of faith, the daily prayer, the fast of Ramadan, and the pilgrimage to Mecca.

I gave the same attention to alms-giving that I gave the other duties.

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That is, I had profound respect for them in an intellectual sort of way, and I told myself that I'd begin practicing in earnest real soon now.

"Evidently you've been considering this for some time," I said.

"We have been neglecting our duty to the poor and the wayfarers, and the widows and orphans among our neighbors."

Some of my friends—my old friends, my former friends—think Papa is nothing but a murderous monster, but that's not true. He's a shrewd businessman who also maintains strong ties to the faith that created our culture. I'm sorry if that seems like a contradiction. He could be harsh, even cruel, at times; but I knew no one else as sincere in his beliefs or as glad to meet the many obligations of the noble Qur'ân.

"What do you wish me to do, O my uncle?"

Friedlander Bey shrugged. "Do I not reward you well for your services?"

"You are unfailingly gracious, O Shaykh," I said.

"Then it would not be a hardship for you to set aside a fifth part of your substance, as is suggested in the Straight Path. Indeed, I desire to make a gift to you that will swell your purse and, at the same time, give you a source of income independent of this house."

That caught my attention. Freedom was what I hungered for every night as I drifted off to sleep. It was what I thought of first when I woke in the morning. And the first step toward freedom was financial independence.

"You are the father of generosity, O Shaykh," I said, "but I am unworthy." Believe me, I was panting to hear what he was going to say. Proper form, however, required me to pretend that I couldn't possibly accept his gift.

He raised one thin, trembling hand. "I prefer that my associates have outside sources of income, sources that they manage themselves and whose profits they need not share with me."

"That is a wise policy," I said. I've known a lot of Papa's "associates," and I know what kind of sources they had. I was sure he was about to cut me into some shady vice deal. Not that I had scruples, you understand. I wouldn't mind getting my drugs wholesale. I've just never had much of a mind for commerce.

"Until recently the Budayeen was your whole world. You know it well, my son, and you understand its people. I have a great deal of influence there, and I thought it best to acquire for you some small commercial concern in that quarter." He extended to me a document laminated in plastic.

I reached forward and took it from him. "What is this, O Shaykh?" I asked.

"It is a title deed. You are now the owner of the property described upon it. From this day forward it is your business to operate. It is a

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profitable enterprise, my nephew. Manage it well and it will reward you, *inshallah.*"

I looked at the deed. "You're—" My voice choked. Papa had bought Chiriga's club and was giving it to me. I looked up at him. "But—"

He waved his hand at me. "No thanks are necessary," he said. "You are my dutiful son."

"But this is Chiri's place. I can't take her club. What will she do?"

Friedlander Bey shrugged. "Business is business," he said simply.

I just stared at him. He had a remarkable habit of giving me things I would have been happier without: My career as a cop, for instance. It wouldn't do any good at all to refuse. "I'm quite unable to express my thanks," I said in a dull voice. I had only two good friends left, Saied the Half-Hajj and Chiri. She was really going to hate this. I was already dreading her reaction.

"Come," said Friedlander Bey, "let us go in to dinner." He stood up behind his desk and held out his hand to me. I followed him, still astonished. It wasn't until later that I realized I hadn't spoken to him about my job with Hajjar.

Chiri's club was crowded that night. The air was still and warm inside, sweet with a dozen different perfumes, sour with sweat and spilled beer. The sexchanges and pre-op debs chatted with the customers with false cheerfulness, and their laughter broke through the shrill music as they called for more champagne cocktails. Bright bolts of red and blue neon slashed down slantwise behind the bar, and brilliant points of light from spinning mirrorballs sparkled on the walls and ceiling. In one corner there was a hologram of Honey Pílar, writhing alone upon a blond mink coat spread on the white sands of some romantic beach. It was an ad for her new sex moddy, *Slow, Slow Burn.* I stared at it for a moment, almost hypnotized.

"Audran," came Chiriga's hoarse voice. She didn't sound happy to see me. "Mr. Boss."

"Listen, Chiri," I said. "Let me—"

"Lily," she called to one of the changes, "get the new owner a drink. Gin and bingara with a hit of Rose's." She looked at me fiercely. "The *tende* is mine, Audran. Private stock. It doesn't go with the club, and I'm taking it with me."

She was making it hard for me. I could only imagine how she felt. "Wait a minute, Chiri. I had nothing to do with—"

"These are the keys. This one's for the register. The money in there's all yours. The girls are yours, the hassles are yours from now on, too. You got any problems, you can go to Papa with 'em." She snatched her bottle of *tende* from under the bar. "*Kwa heri,* motherfucker," she snarled at me. Then she stormed out of the club.

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Everything got real quiet then. Whatever song had been playing came to an end and nobody put on another one. A deb named Kandy was on stage, and she just stood there and stared at me like I might start slavering and shrieking at any moment. People got up from their stools near me and edged away. I looked into their faces and I saw hostility and contempt.

Friedlander Bey wanted to divorce me from all my connections to the Budayeen. Making me a cop had been a great start, but even so I still had a few loyal friends. Forcing Chiri to sell her club had been another brilliant stroke. Soon I'd be just as lonely and friendless as Papa himself, except I wouldn't have the consolation of his wealth and power.

"Look," I said, "this is all a mistake. I got to settle this with Chiri. Indihar, take charge, okay? I'll be right back."

Indihar just gave me a disdainful look. She didn't say anything. I couldn't stand to be in there another minute. I grabbed the keys Chiri'd dropped on the bar and I went outside. She wasn't anywhere in sight on the Street. She might have gone straight home, but she'd probably gone to another club. In a way, I was relieved that I hadn't found her, but I knew that there were surely more ugly scenes to come.

The next morning, I left my car on the Boulevard and walked from there to Laila's modshop on Fourth Street. Laila's was small, but it had character, crammed between a dark, grim gambling den and a noisy bar that catered to teenage sexchanges. The moddies and daddies in Laila's bins were covered with dust and fine grit, and generations of small insects had met their Maker among her wares. It wasn't pretty, but what you got from her most of the time was good old honest value. The rest of the time you got damaged, worthless, even dangerous merchandise. You always felt a little rush of adrenalin before you chipped one of Laila's ancient and shopworn moddies directly into your brain.

She was always—*always*—chipped in, and she never stopped whining. She whined hello, she whined goodbye, she whined in pleasure and in pain. When she prayed, she whined to Allah. She had dry black skin as wrinkled as a raisin, and straggly white hair. Laila was not someone I liked to spend a lot of time with. She was wearing a moddy this morning, of course, but I couldn't tell yet which one. Sometimes she was a famous Eur-Am film or holo star, or a character from a forgotten novel, or Honey Pílar herself. Whoever she was, she'd yammer. That was all I could count on.

"How you doing, Laila?" I said. There was the acrid bite of ammonia in her shop that morning. She was squirting some ugly pink liquid from a plastic bottle up into the corners of the room. Don't ask me why.

She glanced at me and gave me a slow, rapturous smile. It was the look you get only from complete sexual satisfaction or from a large dose

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of Sonneine. "Marîd," she said serenely. She still whined, but now it was a serene whine.

"Got to go out on patrol today, and I thought you might have—"

"Marîd, a young girl came to me this morning and said, 'Mother, the eyes of the narcissus are open, and the cheeks of the roses are red with blushing! Why don't you come outside and see how beautifully Nature has adorned the world!' "

"Laila, if you'll just give me a minute—"

"And I said to her, 'Daughter, that which delights you will fade in an hour, and what profit will you then have in it? Instead, come inside and find with me the far greater beauty of Allah, who created the spring.' " Laila finished her little homily and looked at me expectantly, as if she were waiting for me either to applaud or collapse from enlightenment.

I'd forgotten religious ecstasy. Sex, drugs, and religious ecstasy. Those were the big sellers in Laila's shop, and she tested them all out personally. You had her personal Seal of Approval on every moddy.

"Can I talk now? Laila?"

She stared at me, swaying unsteadily. Slowly she reached one scrawny arm up and popped the moddy out. She blinked a couple of times, and her gentle smile disappeared. "Get you something, Marîd?" she said in her shrill voice.

Laila had been around so long, there was a rumor that as a child she'd watched the imams lay the foundation of the Budayeen's walls. But she knew her moddies. She knew more about old, out-of-print moddies than anyone else I've ever met. I think Laila must have had one of the world's first experimental implants, because her brain had never worked quite right afterward. And the way she still abused the technology, she should have burnt out her last gray cells years ago. She'd withstood cerebral torture that would have turned anyone else into a drooling zombie. Laila probably had a tough protective callus on her brain that prevented anything from penetrating. Anything at all.

I started over from the beginning. "I'm going out on patrol today, and I was wondering if you had a basic cop moddy."

"Sure, I got everything." She hobbled to a bin near the back of the store and dug around in it for a moment. The bin was marked "Prussia/Poland/Breulandy." That didn't have anything to do with which moddies were actually in there; Laila'd bought the battered dividers and scuffed labels from some other kind of shop that was going out of business.

She straightened up after a few seconds, holding a shrinkwrapped moddy in her hand. "This is what you want," she said.

It was the pale blue Complete Guardian moddy I'd seen other rookie cops wearing. It was a good, basic piece of procedure programming that covered almost every conceivable situation. I figured that between the

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Half-Hajj's mean-mother moddy and the Guardian, I was covered. I wasn't in a position to turn down any kind of help, friend or fantasy. For someone who once hated the idea of having his skull amped, I was sure building up a good collection of other people's psyches. I paid Laila for Complete Guardian and put it in my pocket.

She gave me that tranquil smile. It was toothless, of course, and it made me shiver. "Go in safety," she said in her nasal wail.

"Peace be upon you." I hurried out of her shop, walked back down the Street, and passed through the gate to where the car was parked. It wasn't far from there to the station house. I worked at my desk for a little while, until Officer Shaknahyi ducked his head into my cubicle. "Time to roll," he said.

It didn't bother me in the least to tell my data deck to quit. I followed Shaknahyi downstairs to the garage. "That's mine," he said, pointing to a patrol car coming in from the previous shift. He greeted the two tired-looking cops who got out, then slid behind the steering wheel. "Well?" he said, looking up at me.

I wasn't in a hurry to start this. In the first place, I'd be stuck in the narrow confines of the copcar with Shaknahyi for the duration of the shift, and that prospect didn't excite me at all. Second, I'd really rather sit upstairs and read boring files in perfect safety than follow this battle-hardened veteran out into the mean streets. Finally, though, I climbed into the front seat. Sometimes there's only so much stalling you can do. He looked straight out the windshield while he drove.

We cruised around the streets of the city for about an hour. Then, suddenly, a shrill alarm went off, and the synthesized voice of the patrol car's comp deck crackled. "Badge Number 374, respond immediately to bomb threat and hostage situation, Café de la Fée Blanche, Ninth Street North."

"Gargotier's place," said Shaknahyi. "We'll take care of it." The comp deck fell silent.

And Hajjar had promised me I wouldn't have to worry about anything like this. *"Bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Raheem,"* I murmured. In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful.

5.

There was a crowd gathered outside the low railing of the Café de la Fée Blanche's patio. "Get these people out of here," Shaknahyi growled at me. "I don't know what's happening in there, but we got to treat it like the guy has a real bomb. And when you got everybody moved back, go sit in the car."

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"But—"

"I don't want to have to worry about you, too." He ran around the corner of the café to the north, heading for the café's rear entrance.

I hesitated. I knew backup units would be getting here soon, and I decided to let them handle the crowd control. At the moment, there were more important things to worry about. I still had Complete Guardian, and I tore open the shrinkwrap with my teeth. Then I chipped the moddy in.

Audran was sitting at a table in the dimly-lighted San Saberio salon in Florence, listening to a group of musicians playing a demure Schubert quartet. Across from him sat a beautiful blonde woman named Costanzia. She raised a cup to her lips, and her china blue eyes looked at him over the rim. She was wearing a subtle, fascinating fragrance that made Audran think of romantic evenings and soft-spoken promises.

"This must be the best coffee in Tuscany," she murmured. Her voice was sweet and gentle. She gave him a warm smile.

"We didn't come here to drink coffee, my darling," he said. "We came here to see the season's new styles."

She waved a hand. "There is time enough for that. For now, let's just relax."

Audran smiled fondly at her and picked up his delicate cup. The coffee was the beautiful color of polished mahogany, and the wisps of steam that rose from it carried a heavenly, enticing aroma. The first taste overwhelmed Audran with its richness. As the coffee, hot and wonderfully delicious, went down his throat, he realized that Costanzia had been perfectly correct. He had never before been so satisfied by a cup of coffee.

"I'll always remember this coffee," he said.

"Let's come back here again next year, darling," said Costanzia.

Audran laughed indulgently. "For San Saberio's new fashions?"

Costanzia lifted her cup and smiled. "For the coffee," she said.

After the advertisement, there was a blackout during which Audran couldn't see a thing. He wondered briefly who Costanzia was, but he put her out of his mind. Just as he began to panic, his vision cleared. He felt a ripple of dizziness, and then it was as if he'd awakened from a dream. He was rational and cool and he had a job to do. He had become the Complete Guardian.

He couldn't see or hear anything that was happening inside. He assumed that Shaknahyi was making his way quietly through the café's back room. It was up to Audran to give his partner as much support as possible. He jumped the iron railing into the patio, then walked decisively into the interior of the bar.

The scene inside didn't look very threatening. Monsieur Gargotier was

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standing behind the bar, beneath the huge, cracked mirror. His daughter, Maddie, was sitting at a table near the back wall. A young man sat at a table against the west wall, under Gargotier's collection of faded prints of the Mars colony. The young man's hands rested on a small box. His head swung to look at Audran. "Get the fuck out," he shouted, "or this whole place goes up in a big bright bang!"

"I'm sure he means it, monsieur," said Gargotier. He sounded terrified.

"Bet your ass I mean it!" said the young man.

Being a police officer meant sizing up dangerous situations and being able to make quick, sure judgments. Complete Guardian suggested that in dealing with a mentally disturbed individual, Audran should try to find out why he was upset and then try to calm him. Complete Guardian recommended that Audran not make fun of the individual, show anger, or dare him to carry out his threat. Audran raised his hands and spoke calmly. "I'm not going to threaten you," Audran said.

The young man just laughed. He had dirty long hair and a patchy growth of beard, and he was wearing a faded pair of blue jeans and a plaid cotton shirt with its sleeves torn off. He looked a little like Audran had, before Friedlander Bey had raised his standard of living.

"Mind if I sit and talk with you?" asked Audran.

"I can set this off any time I want," said the young man. "You got the guts, sit down. But keep your hands flat on the table."

"Sure." Audran pulled out a chair and sat down. He had his back to the barkeeper, but out of the corner of his eye he could see Maddie Gargotier. She was quietly weeping.

"You ain't gonna talk me out of this," said the young man.

Audran shrugged. "I just want to find out what this is all about. What's your name?"

"The hell's that got to do with anything?"

"My name is Marîd. I was born in Mauretania."

"You can call me Al-Muntaqim." The kid with the bomb had appropriated one of the Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God. It meant "The Avenger."

"You always lived in the city?" Audran asked him.

"Hell no. Misr."

"That's the local name for Cairo, isn't it?" asked Audran.

Al-Muntaqim jumped to his feet, furious. He jabbed a finger toward Gargotier behind the bar and screamed, "See? See what I mean? That's just what I'm talkin' about! Well, I'm gonna stop it once and for all!" He grabbed the box and ripped open the lid.

Audran felt a horrible pain all through his body. It was as if all his joints had been yanked and twisted until his bones pulled apart. Every muscle in his body felt torn, and the surface of his skin stung as if it had

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been sandpapered. The agony went on for a few seconds, and then Audran lost consciousness.

"You all right?"

No, I didn't feel all right. On the outside I felt red-hot and glowing, as if I'd been staked out under the desert sun for a couple of days. Inside, my muscles felt quivery. I had lots of uncontrollable little spasms in my arms, legs, trunk, and face. I had a splitting headache and there was a horrible, sour taste in my mouth. I was having a lot of trouble focusing my eyes, as if someone had spread a thick translucent gunk over them.

I strained to make out who was talking to me. I could barely make out the voice because my ears were ringing so loud. It turned out to be Shaknahyi, and that indicated that I was still alive. For an awful moment after I came to, I thought I might be in Allah's greenroom or somewhere. Not that being alive was any big thrill just then. "What—" I croaked. My throat was so dry I could barely speak.

"Here." Shaknahyi handed a glass of cold water down to me. I realized that I was lying flat on my back on the floor, and Shaknahyi and M. Gargotier were standing over me, frowning and shaking their heads.

I took the water and drank it gratefully. When I finished, I tried talking again. "What happened?" I said.

"You fucked up," Shaknahyi said.

"Right," I said.

A narrow smile crossed Shaknahyi's face. He reached down and offered me a hand. "Get up off the floor."

I stood up wobbily and made my way to the nearest chair. "Gin and bingara," I said to Gargotier. "Put a hit of Rose's lime in it." The barkeep grimaced, but he turned away to get my drink. I took out my pillcase and dug out maybe eight or nine Sonneine.

"I heard about you and your drugs," said Shaknahyi.

"It's all true," I said. When Gargotier brought my drink, I swallowed the opiates. I couldn't wait for them to start fixing me up. Everything would be just fine in a couple of minutes.

"You could've gotten everybody killed, trying to talk that guy down," Shaknahyi said. I was feeling bad enough already, I didn't want to listen to his little lecture right then. He went ahead with it anyway. "What the hell were you trying to do? Establish rapport or something? We don't work that way when people's lives are in danger."

"Yeah?" I said. "What *do* you do?"

He spread his hands like the answer should have been perfectly obvious. "You get around where he can't see you, and you ice the motherfucker."

"Did you ice me before or after you iced Al-Muntaqim?"

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"That what he was calling himself? Hell, Audran, you got to expect a little beam diffusion with these static pistols. I'm real sorry I had to drop you too, but there's no permanent damage, *inshallah*. He jumped up with that box, and I wasn't gonna wait around for you to give me a clear shot. I had to take what I could get."

"It's all right," I said. "Where's The Avenger now?"

"The meat wagon came while you were napping. Took him off to the lock ward at the hospital."

That made me a little angry. "The mad bomber gets shipped to a nice bed in the hospital, but I got to lie around on the filthy floor of this goddamn saloon?"

Shaknahyi shrugged. "He's in a lot worse shape than you are. You only got hit by the fuzzy edge of the charge. He took it full."

It sounded like Al-Muntaqim was going to feel pretty rotten for a while. Didn't bother me none.

"No percentage in debating morality with a loon," said Shaknahyi. "You go in looking for the first opportunity to stabilize the sucker." He made a trigger-pulling motion with his right index finger.

"That's not what Complete Guardian was telling me," I said. "By the way, did you pop the moddy for me? What did you do with it?"

"Yeah," said Shaknahyi, "here it is." He took the moddy out of a shirt pocket and tossed it down on the floor beside me. Then he raised his heavy black boot and stamped the plastic module into jagged pieces. Brightly colored fragments of the webwork circuitry skittered across the floor. "Wear another one of those, I do the same to your face and then I kick the remnants out of my patrol car."

So much for Marîd Audran, Ideal Law Enforcement Officer.

I stood up feeling a lot better, and followed Shaknahyi out of the dimly-lighted bar. M. Gargotier and his daughter, Maddie, went with us. The bartender tried to thank us, but Shaknahyi just raised a hand and looked modest. "No thanks are necessary for performing a duty," he said.

"Come in for free drinks any time," Gargotier said gratefully.

"Maybe we will." Shaknahyi turned to me. "Let's ride," he said.

We went out through the patio gate. On the way back to the car I said, "It makes me feel kind of good to be welcome somewhere again."

Shaknahyi looked at me. "Accepting free drinks is a major infraction."

"I didn't know they *had* infractions in the Budayeen," I said. Shaknahyi smiled. It seemed that things had thawed a little between us.

Shaknahyi cruised back down the Street and out of the Budayeen. Curiously, I was no longer wary of being spotted in the copcar by any of my old friends. In the first place, the way they'd been treating me, I figured the hell with 'em. In the second place, I felt a little different now that I'd been fried in the line of duty. The experience at the Fée Blanche

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had changed my thinking. Now I appreciated the risks a cop has to take day after day.

Shaknahyi surprised me. "You want to stop somewhere?" he asked.

"Sounds good." I was still pretty weak and the sunnies had left me a little lightheaded, so I was glad to agree.

I unclipped the phone from my belt and spoke Chiri's commcode into it. I heard it ring eight or nine times before she answered it. "Talk to me," she said. She sounded irked.

"Chiri? It's Marîd."

"What do *you* want, motherfucker?"

"Look, you haven't given me any chance to explain. It's not my fault."

"You said that before." She gave a contemptuous laugh. "Famous last words, honey: 'It's not my fault.' That's what my uncle said when he sold my mama to some goddamn Arab slaver."

"I never knew—"

"Forget it, it ain't even true. You wanted a chance to explain, so explain."

Well, it was showtime, but suddenly I didn't have any idea what to say to her. "I'm real sorry, Chiri," I said.

She just laughed again. It wasn't a friendly sound.

I plunged ahead. "One morning I woke up and Papa said, 'Here, now you own Chiriga's club, isn't that wonderful?' What did you expect me to say to him?"

"I know you, honey. I don't expect you to say *anything* to Papa. He didn't have to cut off your balls. You sold 'em."

"Chiri, we been friends a long time. Try to understand. Papa got this idea to buy your club and give it to me. I didn't know a thing about it in advance. I didn't want it when he gave it to me. I tried to tell him, but—"

"I'll bet. I'll just bet you told him."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I think she was enjoying this a lot. "I told him about as much as anyone can tell Papa anything."

"Why *my* place, Marîd? The Budayeen's full of crummy bars. Why did he pick mine?"

I knew the answer to that: Because Friedlander Bey was prying me loose from the few remaining connections to my old life. Making me a cop had alienated most of my friends. Forcing Chiriga to sell her club had turned her against me. Next, Papa'd find a way to make Saied the Half-Hajj hate my guts, too. "Just his sense of humor, Chiri," I said hopelessly. "Just Papa proving that he's always around, always watching, ready to hit us with his lightning bolts when we least expect it."

There was a long silence from her. "And you're gutless, too."

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My mouth opened and closed. I didn't know what she was talking about. "Huh?"

"I said you're a gutless *panya*."

She's always slinging Swahili at me. "What's a *panya*, Chiri?" I asked.

"It's like a big rat, only stupider and uglier. You didn't dare do this in person, did you, motherfucker? You'd rather whine to me over the phone. Well, you're gonna have to face me. That's all there is to it."

I squeezed my eyes shut and grimaced. "Okay, Chiri, whatever you want. Can you come by the club?"

"*The* club, you say? You mean, *my* club? The club I used to own?"

"Yeah," I said. "Your club."

She grunted. "Not on your life, you diseased jackass. I'm not setting foot in there unless things change the way I want 'em. But I'll meet you somewhere else. I'll be in Courane's place in half an hour. That's not in the Budayeen, honey, but I'm sure you can find it. Show up if you think you can handle it." There was a sharp click, and then I was listening to the burr of the dial tone.

"Dragged you through it, didn't she?" said Shaknahyi. He'd enjoyed every moment of my discomfort. I was starting to like the guy, but he was still a bastard sometimes.

I clipped the phone back on my belt. "Ever hear of a bar called Courane's?"

He snorted. "This Christian chump shows up in the city a few years ago." He was wheeling the patrolcar through Rasmiyya, a neighborhood east of the Budayeen that I'd never been in before. "Guy named Courane. Called himself a poet, but nobody ever saw much proof of that. Somehow he got to be a big hit with the European community. One day he opens what he calls a salon, see. Just a quiet, dark bar where everything's made out of wicker and glass and stainless steel. Lots of potted plastic plants. Nowadays he ain't the darling of the brunch crowd anymore, but he still pulls this melancholy expatriate routine. That where you're gonna meet Chiri?"

I looked at him and shrugged. "It was her choice."

He grinned at me. "Want to attract a lot of attention when you show up?"

I sighed. "Please no," I muttered. That Jirji, he was some kidder.

6.

Twenty minutes later we were in a middle-class district of two and three-story houses. The streets were broader than in the Budayeen, and the whitewashed buildings had strips of open land around them, planted

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with small bushes and flowering shrubs. Tall date palms leaned drunkenly along the verges of the pavement. The neighborhood seemed deserted, if only because there were no shouting children wrestling on the sidewalks or chasing each other around the corners of the houses. It was a very settled, very sedate part of town. It was so peaceful, it made me uncomfortable.

"Courane's is just up here," said Shaknahyi. He turned into a poorer street that was little more than an alley. One side was hemmed in by the back walls of the same flat-roofed houses. There were small balconies on the second floor, and bright, lamplit windows obscured by lattices made of narrow wooden strips. On the other side of the alley were boarded-up buildings and a few businesses: A leather-worker's shop, a bakery, a restaurant that specialized in bean dishes, a bookstall.

There was also Courane's, out of place in that constricted avenue. The proprietor had set out a few tables, but no one lingered in the white-painted wicker chairs beneath these Cinzano umbrellas. Shaknahyi tapped off the engine, and we got out of the patrol car. I supposed that Chiri hadn't arrived yet, or that she was waiting for me inside. My stomach hurt.

"Officer Shaknahyi!" A middle-aged man came toward us, a welcoming smile on his face. He was about my height, maybe fifteen or twenty pounds heavier, with receding brown hair brushed straight back. He shook hands with Shaknahyi, then turned to me.

"Sandor," said Shaknahyi, "this is my partner, Marîd Audran."

"Glad to meet you," said Courane.

"May Allah increase your honor," I said.

Courane's look was amused. "Right," he said. "Can I get you boys something to drink?"

I glanced at Shaknahyi. "Are we on duty?" I asked.

"Nah," he said. I asked for my usual, and Shaknahyi got a soft drink. We followed Courane into his establishment. It was just as I'd pictured it: Shiny chrome and glass tables, white wicker chairs, a beautiful antique bar of polished dark wood, chrome ceiling fans, and, as Shaknahyi had mentioned, lots of dusty artificial plants stuck in corners and hanging in baskets from the ceiling.

Chiriga was sitting at a table near the back. "Where you at, Jirji? Marîd?" she said.

"Aw right," I said. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"Never in my life turned one down." She held up her glass. "Sandy?" Courane nodded and went to make our drinks.

I sat down beside Chiri. "Anyway," I said uncomfortably, "I want to talk to you about coming to work in the club."

"Kind of a ballsy thing for you to ask, isn't it?" Chiri said.

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"Hey, look, I told you what the situation was. How much longer you gonna keep this up?"

Chiri gave me a little smile. "I don't know," she said. "I'm getting a big kick out of it."

I'd reached my limit. I can only feel so guilty. "Fine," I said. "Go get another job someplace else. I'm sure a big, strong *kaffir* like you won't have any trouble at all finding somebody who's interested."

Chiri looked hurt. "Okay, Marîd," she said softly, "let's stop." She opened her bag and took out a long white envelope, and pushed it across the table toward me.

"What's this?" I asked.

"Yesterday's take from your goddamn club. You're supposed to show up around closing time, you know, to count out the register and pay the girls. Or don't you care?"

"I don't really care," I said, peeking at the cash. There was a lot of money in the envelope. "That's why I want to hire you."

"To do what?"

I spread my hands. "I want you to keep the girls in line. And I need you to separate the customers from their money. You're famous for that. Just do exactly what you used to."

Her brow furrowed. "I used to go home every night with all of this." She tapped the envelope. "Now I'm just gonna get a few kiam here and there, whatever you decide to spill. I don't like that."

Courane arrived with our drinks and I paid for them. "I was gonna offer you a lot more than what the debs and changes get," I said to Chiri.

"I should hope so." She nodded her head emphatically. "Bet your ass, honey, you want me to run your club for you, you're gonna have to pay up front. Business is business, and action is action. I want fifty percent."

"Making yourself a partner?" I'd expected something like that. Chiri smiled slowly, showing those long, filed canines. She was worth more than fifty percent to me. "All right," I said.

She looked startled, as if she hadn't expected me to give in so easily. "Should've asked for more," she said bitterly. "And I don't want to dance unless I feel like it."

"Fine."

"And the name of the club stays 'Chiriga's'."

"All right."

"And you let me do my own hiring and firing. I don't want to get stuck with Floor-Show Fanya if she tickles you into giving her a job. Bitch gets so loaded, she throws up on customers."

"You expect a hell of a lot, Chiri."

She gave me a wolfish grin. "Paybacks are a bitch, ain't they?" she said.

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Chiri was wringing every last bit of advantage out of this situation. "Okay, you pick your own crew."

She paused to drink again. "By the way," she said, "that's fifty percent of the *gross* I'm getting, isn't it?"

Chiri was terrific. "Uh, yeah," I said, laughing. "Why don't you let me give you a ride back to the Budayeen? You can start working this afternoon."

"I already passed by there. I left Indihar in charge." She noticed that her glass was empty again, and she held it up and waved it at Courane. "Want to play a game, Marîd?" She jerked a thumb toward the back of the bar, where Courane had a Transpex unit.

It's a game that lets two people with corymbic implants sit across from each other and chip into the machine's CPU. The first player imagines a bizarre scenario in detail, and it becomes a wholly realistic environment for the second player, who's scored on how well he adapts—or survives. Then in turn the second player does the same for the first.

It's a great game to bet money on. It scared the hell out of me at first, though, because while you're playing, you forget it's only a game. It seems absolutely real. The players exercise almost godlike power on each other. Courane's model looked old, a version whose safety features could be bypassed by a clever mechanic. There were rumors of people actually having massive strokes and coronaries while they were chipped into a jiggered Transpex.

"Go ahead, Audran," said Shaknahyi, "let's see what you got."

"All right, Chiri," I said, "let's play."

She stood up and walked back to the Transpex booth. I followed her, and both Shaknahyi and Courane came along too. "Want to bet the other fifty percent of my club?" she said. Her eyes glittered over the rim of her cocktail glass.

"Can't do that. Papa wouldn't approve." I felt pretty confident, because I could read the record of the machine's previous high games. A perfect Transpex score was 1,000 points, and I averaged in the upper 800s. The top scores on this machine were in the lower 700s. Maybe the scores were low because Courane's bar didn't attract many borderline nutso types. Like me. "I'll bet what's inside this envelope, though."

That sounded good to her. "I can cover it," she said. I didn't doubt that Chiri could lay her hands on quite a lot of cash when she needed it.

Courane set fresh drinks down for all of us. Shaknahyi dragged a wicker chair near enough to watch the computer-modeled images of the illusions Chiri and I would create. I fed five kiam into the Transpex machine. "You can go first, if you want," I said.

"Yeah," said Chiri. "It's gonna be fun, making you sweat." She took one of the Transpex's moddy links and socketed it on her corymbic plug,

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then touched Player One on the console. I took the second link, murmured *"Bismillah,"* and chipped in Player Two.

At first there was only a kind of warm, flickering fog, veined with iridescence like shimmery mother of pearl. Audran was lost in a cloud, but he didn't feel anxious about it. It was absolutely silent and still, not even a whisper of breeze. He was aware of a mild scent surrounding him, the fragrance of fresh sea air. Then things began to change.

Now he was floating in the cloud, no longer sitting or standing, but somehow drifting through space easily and peacefully. Audran still wasn't concerned; it was a perfectly comfortable sensation. Only gradually did the fog begin to dissipate. With a shock Audran realized that he wasn't floating, but swimming in a warm, sun-dappled sea.

Below him waved long tendrils of algae that clung to hillocks of brightly colored coral. Anemones of many hues and many shapes reached their grasping tentacles toward him, but he cut smartly through the water well out of their reach.

Audran's eyesight was poor, but his other senses let him know what was happening around him. The smell of the salt air had been replaced by many subtle aromas that he couldn't name but were all achingly familiar. Sounds came to him, sibilant, rushing noises that echoed in hollow tones.

He was a fish. He felt free and strong, and he was hungry. Audran dived down close to the rolling sea bottom, near the stinging anemones where tiny fishes schooled for protection. He flashed among them, gobbling down mouthfuls of the scarlet and yellow creatures. His hunger was appeased, at least for now. The scent of others of his species wafted by him on the current, and he turned toward its source.

He swam for a long while until he realized that he'd lost the trace. Audran couldn't tell how much time had passed. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered here in the sparkling, sunny sea. He browsed over a gorgeous reef, worrying the delicate featherdusters, sending the scarlet banded shrimps and the porcelain crabs scuttling.

Above him, the ocean darkened. A shadow passed over him, and Audran felt a ripple of alarm. He could not look up, but compression waves told him that something huge was circling nearby. Audran remembered that he was not alone in this ocean: It was now his turn to flee. He darted down over the reef and cut a zigzag path only a few inches above the sandy floor.

The ravenous shadow trailed close behind. Audran looked for somewhere to hide, but there was nothing, no sunken wrecks or rocks or hidden caves. He made a sharp evasive turn and raced back the way he'd come. The thing that stalked him followed lazily, easily.

Suddenly it dived on him, a voracious, mad engine of murder, all dead black eyes and gleaming chrome steel teeth. Flushed from the sea bottom,

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Audran knifed up through the green water toward the surface, though he knew there was no shelter there. The great beast raged close behind him. In a froth of boiling seafoam, Audran broke through the waves, into the fearfully thin air, and—flew. He glided over the whitecapped water until, at last, he fell back into the welcoming element, exhausted.

And the nightmare creature was there, its ghastly mouth yawning wide to rend him. The daggered jaws closed slowly, victoriously, until for Audran there was only blackness and the knowledge of the agony to come.

"Jeez," I murmured, when the Transpex returned my consciousness.

"Some game," said Shaknahyi.

"How'd I do?" asked Chiri. She sounded exhilarated.

"Pretty good," said Courane. "623. It was a promising scenario, but you never got him to panic."

"I sure as hell tried," she said. "I want another drink." She gave me a quirky grin.

I took out my pillcase and swallowed eight Paxium with a mouthful of gin. Maybe as a fish I hadn't been paralyzed with fear, but I was feeling a strong nervous reaction now. "I want another drink too," I said. "I'll stand a round for everybody."

"Bigshot," said Shaknahyi.

Both Chiri and I waited until our heartbeats slowed down to normal. Courane brought a tray with the fresh drinks, and I watched Chiri throw hers down in two long gulps. She was fortifying herself for whatever evil things I was going to do to her mind. She was going to need it.

Chiri touched Player Two on the game's console, and I saw her eyes slowly close. She looked as if she were napping placidly. That was going to end in a hell of a hurry. On the holoscreen was the same opalescent haze I'd wandered through until Chiri'd decided it was the ocean. I reached out and touched the Player One panel.

Audran gazed down upon the ball of mist, like Allah in the highest of the heavens. He concentrated on building a richly detailed illusion, and he was pleased with his progress. Instead of letting it take on form and reality gradually, Audran loosed an explosion of sensory information. The woman far below was stunned by the purity of color in this world, the clarity of sound, the intensity of the tastes an textures and smells. She cried out and her voice pealed in the cool, clean air like a carillon. She fell to her knees, her eyes shut tightly and her hands over her ears.

Audran was patient. He wanted the woman to explore his creation. He wasn't going to hide behind a tree, jump out and frighten her. There was time enough for terror later.

After a while the woman lowered her hands and stood up. She looked

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around uncertainly. "Marîd?" she called. Once again the sound of her own voice rang with unnatural sharpness. She glanced behind her, toward the misty purple mountains in the west. Then she turned back to the east, toward the shore of a marshy lake that reflected the impossible azure of the sky. Audran didn't care which direction she chose; it would all be the same in the end.

The woman decided to follow the swampy shoreline to the southeast. She walked for hours, listening to the liquid trilling of songbirds and inhaling the poignant perfume of unknown blossoms. After a while the sun rested on the shoulders of the purple hills behind her, and then slipped away, leaving Audran's illusion in darkness. He provided a full moon, huge and gleaming silver like a serving platter. The woman grew weary, and at last she decided to lie down in the sweet-smelling grass and sleep.

Audran woke her in the morning with a gentle rain shower. "Marîd?" she cried again. He would not answer her. "How long you gonna leave me here?" She shivered.

The golden sun mounted higher, and while it warmed the morning, the heat never became stifling. Just after noon, when the woman had walked almost halfway around the lake, she came upon a pavilion made all of crimson and sapphire blue silk. "What the hell is all this, Marîd?" the woman shouted. "Just get it over with, all right?"

The woman approached the pavilion anxiously. "Hello?" she called.

A moment later a young woman in a white gown came out of the pavilion. Her feet were bare and her pale blonde hair was thrown carelessly over one shoulder. She was smiling and carrying a wooden tray. "Hungry?" she asked in a friendly voice.

"Yes," said the woman.

"My name is Maryam. I've been waiting for you. I'm sorry, all I've got is bread and fresh milk." She poured from a silver pitcher into a silver goblet.

"Thanks." The woman ate and drank greedily.

Maryam shaded her eyes with one hand. "Are you going to the fair?"

The woman shook her head. "I don't know about any fair."

Maryam laughed. "Everybody goes to the fair. Come on, I'll take you."

The woman waited while Maryam disappeared into the pavilion again with the breakfast things. She came back out a moment later. "We're all set now," she said gaily. "We can get to know each other while we walk."

They continued around the lake until the woman saw a scattering of large, peaked tents of striped canvas, all with colorful pennants snapping in the breeze. She heard many people laughing and shouting, and the sound of axes biting wood, and metal ringing on metal. She could smell bread baking, and cinnamon buns, and lamb roasting on spits turning

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slowly over glowing coals. Her mouth began to water and she felt her excitement growing despite herself.

"I don't have any money to spend," she said.

"Money?" Maryam asked, laughing. "What is money?"

The woman spent the afternoon going from tent to tent, seeing the strange exhibits and miraculous entertainments. She sampled exotic foods and drank concoctions of unknown liquors. Now and then she remembered to be afraid. She looked over her shoulder, wondering when the pleasant face of this fantasy would fall away. "Marîd," she called, "what are you doing?"

"Who are you calling?" asked Maryam.

"I'm not sure," said the woman.

Maryam laughed. "Look over here," she said, pulling on the woman's sleeve, showing her a booth where a heavily-muscled woman was shaping a disturbing collage from the claws, teeth, and eyes of lizards.

They listened to children playing strange music on instruments made from the carcasses of small animals, and then they watched several old women spin their own white hair into thread, and then weave it into napkins and scarves.

One of the toothless hags leered at Maryam and the woman. "Take," she said in a gravelly voice.

"Thank you, grandmother," said Maryam. She selected a pair of human-hair handkerchiefs.

The hours wore on, and at last the sun began to set. The moon rose as full as yestereve. "Is this going to go on all night?" the woman asked.

"All night and all day tomorrow," said Maryam. "Forever."

The woman shuddered.

From that moment she couldn't shake a growing dread, a sense that she'd been lured to this place and abandoned. She remembered nothing of who she'd been before she'd awakened beside the lake, but she felt she'd been horribly tricked. She prayed to someone called Marîd. She wondered if that was God.

"Marîd," she murmured fearfully, "I wish you'd just end this already."

But Audran was not ready to end it. He watched as the woman and Maryam grew sleepy and found a large tent filled with comfortable cushions and sheets of satin and fine linen. They laid themselves down and slept.

In the morning the woman arose, dismayed to be still trapped at the eternal fair. Maryam found them a good breakfast of sausage, fried bread, broiled tomatoes, and hot tea. Maryam's enthusiasm was undiminished, and she led the woman toward still more disquieting entertainments. The woman, however, felt only a crazily mounting dread.

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"You've had me here for two days, Marîd," she pleaded. "Please kill me and let me go." Audran gave her no sign, no answer.

They passed the third day examining one dismaying thing after another: Teenage girls who seemed to have living roses in place of breasts; a candlemaker whose wares would not provide light in the presence of an infidel; staged combat between a blind man and two maddened dragons; a family hammering together a scale model of the fair out of iron, a project that had occupied them for generations and that might never be completed; a cage of crickets that had been taught to chirp the Shahada, the Islamic testament of faith.

The afternoon passed, and once again night began to fall. All through the fair, men jammed blazing torches into iron sconces on tall poles. Still Maryam led the woman from tent to tent, but the woman no longer enjoyed the spectacles. She was filled with a sense of impending catastrophe. She felt an urgent need to escape, but she knew she couldn't even find her way out of the infinite fairgrounds.

And then a shrill, buzzing alarm sounded. "What's that?" she asked, startled. All around her, people had begun to flee.

"Yallah!" cried Maryam, her face stricken with horror. "Run! Run and save your life!"

"What is it?" the woman shouted. "Tell me what it is!"

Maryam had collapsed to the ground, weeping and moaning. "In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful," she muttered over and over again. The woman could get nothing more sensible from her.

The woman left her there, and she followed the stream of terrified people as they ran among the tents. And then the woman saw them: Two immense giants, impossibly huge, hundreds of feet tall, crushing the landscape as they came nearer. They waded among the distant mountains, and then the shocks from their jolting footsteps began to churn the water in the lake. The ground heaved as they came nearer. The woman raised a hand to her breast, then staggered backward a few steps.

One of the giants turned his head slowly and looked straight at her. He was horribly ugly, with a great scar across one empty eye socket and a mouthful of rotten, snaggled fangs. He lifted an arm and pointed to her.

"No," she said, her voice hoarse with fear, "not me!" She wanted to run but she couldn't move. The giant stooped toward her, fierce and glowering. He bent to capture her in his enormous hand.

"Marîd!" the woman screamed. "Please!" Nothing happened. The giant's fist began to close around her.

The woman tried to reach up and unplug the moddy link, but her arms were frozen. She wouldn't escape that easily. The woman shrieked as she realized she couldn't even jack out.

The disfigured giant lifted her off the ground and drew her close to his

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single eye. His horrid grin spread and he laughed at her terror. His stinking breath sickened the woman. She struggled again to lift her hands, to pull the moddy link free. Her arms were held fast. She screamed and screamed, and then at last she fainted.

My eyes were bleary for a moment, and I could hear Chiri panting for breath beside me. I didn't think she'd be so upset. After all, it was only a Transpex game, and it wasn't the first time she'd ever played. She knew what to expect.

"You're a sick motherfucker, Marîd," she said at last.

"Listen, Chiri, I was just—"

She waved a hand at me. "I know, I know. You won the game and the bet. I'm still just a little shook, that's all. I'll have your money for you tonight."

"Forget the money, Chiri, I—"

I shouldn't have said that. "Hey, you son of a bitch, when I lose a bet I pay up. You're gonna take the money or I'm gonna cram it down your throat. But, God, you've got some kind of twisted imagination."

"That last part," said Courane, "where she couldn't raise her hands to pop the moddy link, that was real cold." He said it approvingly.

"Hell of a sadistic thing to do," said Chiri, shivering. "Last time I ever touch a Transpex with *you*."

"A few extra points, that's all, Chiri. I didn't know what my score was. I might have needed a couple more points."

"You finished with 941," said Shaknahyi. He was looking at me oddly, as if he were impressed by my score and repelled at the same time. "We got to go." He stood up and tossed down the last slug of his soft drink.

I stood up too. "You all right now, Chiri?" I put my hand on her shoulder.

"I'm fine. I'm still shaking off the game. It was like a nightmare." She took a deep breath and let it out. "I got to get back to the club so Indihar can go home."

"Give you a ride?" asked Shaknahyi.

"Thanks," said Chiri, "but I got my own transportation."

"See you later then," I said.

"*Kwa heri*, you bastard." At least she was smiling when she called me that. I thought maybe things were okay between us again. I was real glad about that.

Outside, Shaknahyi shook his head and grinned. "She was right, you know. That was a hell of a sadistic thing. Like unnecessary torture. You *are* a sick son of a bitch."

Maybe, I thought as we headed back to the station house. But if ever

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I decided that I no longer liked my true personality, there was an almost unlimited supply of artificial ones I could chip in.

I leaned back in my seat and stared out the window. I'd managed to heal the bad feelings between Chiri and me, and I was getting a handle on this cop business. All that remained was Angel Monroe, and a solution to that problem would occur to me soon. I was sure that Laila had a Perfect Mother moddy in her shop. Of course, my mom's skull wasn't amped like mine, but I could take care of that for her, even if I had to wire her brain myself with a jackknife and a coathanger.

See? Life is hard, all right, so you've got to take help wherever you can find it. I thought about that as I scratched my scalp around my corymbic implant. As Shaknahyi swung the patrolcar into the garage, I thought, what's the point of sexy new technology if you can't find some way to pervert it? ●

NEXT ISSUE

Hugo- and Nebula-winner **Robert Silverberg** returns to these pages next month with our evocative June cover story, "Enter a Soldier. Later: Enter Another." In this one, Silverberg examines a fascinating new technology that enables a group of scientists to pit two very different kinds of soldiers—the conquistadore Pizarro and the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates—against each other in a tense and absorbing contest of brains and heart and spirit... one with some very unexpected and unsettling results. This is Silverberg at his ingenious best. Speaking of ingenious, British author **Ian Watson,** a highly innovative writer known as one of the most original idea-men in the business, is also on hand for June, stretching even his supple imagination to the limit to give us his big new novella "Nanoware Time," a wild and widescreen story, packed with provocative new ideas, exploring a twenty-first century world in which bizarre aliens have landed on the Moon and are offering to share some of their seemingly limitless power with us—*if* we are willing to let ourselves be possessed by Demons... Don't miss *this* one!

ALSO IN JUNE: **Eileen Gunn,** whose "Stable Strategies For Middle Management" was one of our hottest stories last year, returns with a very unusual look, both funny and chilling, at a sort of perverted high-tech Ozzie-and-Harriet Leave It To Beaver suburbia, in "Computer Friendly"; **Michael Swanwick** takes us down some Mean Streets in modern-day Philadelphia for an encounter among the oil refineries and tank farms with some very ancient magic, in a fast-paced story about the dangers of traveling "The Dragon Line"; new writer **Allen M. Steele** examines the first Moon Landing—although perhaps not *quite* the way you remember it—in the thought-provoking saga of "John Harper Wilson"; from the depths of space, **Steven Utley** then plunges us deep into the steaming prehistoric swamps of the distant past, for a chilling look at the things that crawl beneath "The Tall Grass"; and **James Patrick Kelly** treats us to a wry and whimsical look at Modern Love and the taking of some big—rather unusual—chances, and shows us that all you really need, perhaps, is a little "Faith." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our June issue on sale on your newsstands on May 2, 1989.

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dig its way to any sense of artistic respectability.

It's a respectability that helped bring Alan Moore's twelve-issue mini-series, *Watchmen*, a Hugo in 1988. *Watchmen* was a brilliant alternate history that took, as its starting point, that there are costumed heroes . . . in our real world. Not some laundered vision of comic book life, but a whole complex society, with all its political and personal pressures.

Moore walked a tightrope—meshing the absurdity of comic book heroes with the real world. "There's sort of the danger that it could just be laughable," he told me. "But I think that if you are aware of it, you can almost use the ridiculousness to increase the pathos."

Watchmen was a phenomenal success, and it helped open the door to another level of aspiration for comic books, ranging from Moore's own look at the Batman legend, *The Killing Joke*—with the definitive Joker—to *Lone Wolf and Cub*, about medieval Japan, a lone assassin, and his young son. It was imported by First Comics and introduced by Frank Miller.

Eclipse Comics, just celebrating its tenth anniversary, recently announced that Clive Barker's *Books of Blood* will appear in graphic adaptations called *Tapping the Vein*. Barker's best work, both in his story collections and his novels, is original and sensual horror. And, according to editor Fred Burke, Eclipse won't "be diluting the powerful vision of any of Barker's tales."

Comico, which produced Harlan Ellison's *Night and the Enemy* with art by Ken Steacy, recently released *Bloodscent*, graphic and sophisticated horror with an introduction by make-up effects master Tom Savini.

Marvel Comics has even set up a special project aimed at SF fans. Called Ad Astra (meaning "to the stars"), each issue will include from three to five stories. Contracts have been signed with Laurence M. Janifer, Barry N. Malzberg, and Joe Faust. Other writers have also been contacted. The anthology series will start with the discovery of a pseudo faster-than-light drive, then all the other stories will follow along a pre-established time-line.

Could the Batman movie affect any of this? Well, it could certainly affect the perception of the public and the bookstore owners who are only now stocking comics and graphic novels and the editors who allow the expanding world of comics to be covered. Warner Bros. has sent out carefully written Press Releases that seem to acknowledge the fear of the fans, reassuring everyone that this Batman will *not* be a campy and goofy exercise, setting back the comic book world another twenty years.

The object of all this concern remains to be seen in movie multiplexes everywhere, coming this summer. ●

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

It's A Small World

Wheel of the Winds
By M. J. Engh
Tor, $18.95

M.J. Engh made quite an impression on more than a few people with her *Arslan,* published over a decade ago. It was the story of a Mideastern conqueror in the American Midwest and, unlikely as it sounds, she managed to bring it off by some authorial miracle. Now, finally, there's a new novel, *Wheel of the Winds* by title, and it's about as different from *Arslan* as possible while being just as peculiar.

Most of the book is devoted to an around-the-world voyage, by boat and foot. As it happens, the (nameless) world so encircled is not very large, but the trip still becomes a sort of mini-epic due to the circumstances and the personnel. The major culture on this world is a placid, pre-technological one, running up and down the coast of the one (small) ocean, and back into the hinterland into the mountains along one (large) river. The inhabitants know nothing of the rest of the world, cut off as they are by ocean and mountain. Besides, the everlasting light that shines from halfway up the sky gets brighter and hotter and higher the farther out to sea one goes, dimmer and lower as one goes into the mountains.

The four who make the entire trip are the Warden (a sort of sheriff) from upriver, the female Captain of a vessel that runs between the two major towns along the coast, a spunky old dog named Broz (the dogs on this world climb trees—lesser gravity?), and the Exile.

The Exile is a strange sort of dwarfish creature brought to the Warden by upriver loggers. He speaks the language (badly), is cheerful and co-operative, and claims to have forgotten his origins; nevertheless, every once in a while he comes up with strange and incomprehensible "theories" about the world's weather, currents, and even other worlds beyond the clouds. These silly stories intrigue the adventurous Captain and baffle the pragmatic Warden.

Nevertheless, the Warden has become fond of his charge. It's because of this that the voyage begins, when the Warden and the Captain impulsively help the Exile to escape the authorities.

They sail on the current that heads out into the sea, and even-

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tually come to the undiscovered other shore. From there it's all sorts of adventures with peculiar flora, fauna, other species of people, and toward the end, utter darkness as the steadfast light in the sky sinks below the horizon as they travel.

The Captain, the Warden and Broz surmount their hair-raising vicissitudes (including broken limbs, near-starvation, and the loss of an eye for Broz) with the cheerful insouciance of the Rover Boys, but still emerge as wonderfully rounded, likable characters (Broz, too). The Exile is an enigma, clearly dissimulating about much, seeming to try to escape at times (the Warden still considers him his prisoner), and insisting on getting to some cached equipment with which he says he will send a message to comrades beyond the clouds. If he does not, some sort of unspecified disaster will come to this world.

I won't even try to explain why, once the world has been circumnavigated, they start all over again, picking up the pieces left behind the first time.

Engh makes this peculiar scenario work as it goes, and then, toward the end, a revelation occurs, and suddenly the whole story assumes a new dimension. Admittedly you've been more or less on to it for some time, but the specificity is what realigns the way you see what has gone before. Essentially, Engh has been showing you a not-uncommon plot from an entirely different angle.

It's too bad there's no major award for real originality in SF—if so, *Wheel of the Winds* would win this year's hands down. It's not quite like anything I can think of (except, curiously enough, Hodgson's *The Night Land,* to which it really bears no resemblance). And what a rarity that is these days.

Vulcanized

Spock's World
By Diane Duane
Pocket Books, $16.95

Let's get one thing straight. I am not a snob about "Star Trek." I enjoyed the series' first run. (Yes, kiddies, there are still a few of us around who actually saw the original broadcasts. On network TV. In prime time. Maybe we should form a club.) I have watched with interest as ST has becoming a publishing phenomenon over the past decade. I even like the new series—acting and production values are very good indeed. So I venture into reviewing a Star Trek book with no apologies and some good reasons. As noted above, it is one of the rare instances where a successful TV series has spawned an even more successful book series, which merits some sort of notice.

The author of the current *Spock's World,* Diane Duane, is an interesting writer with some good, non-ST novels behind her. And the publisher claims this to be the first *Star Trek* hard-cover. (Arguable, only because a limited hard-cover edition of the *ST, the Motion Picture* novelization was published.)

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The novel is primarily concerned with a Federation crisis; Spock's home world, Vulcan, is holding a referendum *re* pulling out of the Federation, supposedly for ethical and moral reasons, which are complex as only the Vulcans can be complex. The *Enterprise* is ordered to Vulcan, not only to monitor, but because Kirk, Spock, and (as it turns out) McCoy will have to testify. Also heading home are Spock's Vulcan Ambassador father, Sarek, and human mother, Amanda.

The story of the events leading up to the vote, including the days-long talk show which makes up the arguments for and against abandoning the Federation, are alternated with chapters dealing with episodes from Vulcan's history. The first has to do with the planet's formation (some excellent writing here, making inanimate interstellar history downright poetic), the last is a minibio of Sarek, including the story of how he and Amanda came to mate (and a satisfactory justification for the interspecies breeding which resulted in Spock).

As it turns out, the story is really a direct sequel to the series episode, "Amok Time," written by Theodore Sturgeon, which is the only one, as I remember, to take place on Vulcan. (Knowledge of that episode is a big help in reading *Spock's World.*) Seems that T'Pring, the girl that Spock more or less left at the altar, has in reaction to that long-ago event committed some dastardly doings.

Duane has perhaps gone almost too far in determinedly not writing an easy, airhead TV spinoff. The principals (and the Vulcans) do an awful lot of talking in the major part of the narrative, and the alternating "historical" chapters are uneven in their effectiveness. Nonetheless, she has decorated the story with a lot of inventive details about the world's favorite future universe, and ST aficionados will find this a major addition to the canon. Those who can take ST or leave it alone might be amused, or might find it more than they want to know about Vulcan.

In any case, like so much of the published ST material, it's a textbook exercise in how an idea made for TV, with its limited capacity for complex concepts, can be enlarged and enriched by the printed word. The miracle remains that a TV series, cooked up for a commercial network, would have this infinite potential for enlargement.

Common Lore

The Loremasters

By Leslie Gadallah

Del Rey, $3.50 (paper)

In Leslie Gadallah's *The Loremasters,* Reese is an infiltrator from the Mid-American Enclave into Monn, a small town with a medieval culture typical of most settlements in this world (mostly) reverted to pre-technological semi-barbarism. Inheriting nomenclature from the wars which brought this about, the inhabitants of the high-tech (but energy poor) enclaves call those who live outside

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"phobes," while those primitive types call the worst kind of witch "philes" (presumably each term is proceeded by an understood "techno"). Reese passes himself off fairly easily as someone from another phobe town, but then proceeds to scatter all sorts of high-tech items around his dwelling place, and is extremely open with various inexplicable objects (aspirin, holograms), particularly with Sarah, the outcaste fifteen-year-old urchin who has attached herself to him.

This seems to set the tone for the novel, unfortunately: It's a little hard to sympathize, *or* empathize, with a hero who is quite so naïve, and the author includes some other factors equally hard to swallow. The primitives, for instance, completely ignore the high tech Enclave (which is apparently close enough for Reese to consider spending nights there rather than in the uncomfortable village) as well as the transport pods which speed along the "Witch Road." This is explained simply by the fact that they are a cultural tabu. Sorry, I can't buy it.

Reese, of course, gets taken for a witch, and raises all sorts of problems with the Phobe civil authorities and priesthood. In the meantime, his girlfriend from the Enclave mounts an expedition to rescue him. After the usual amount of intrigue and dustup, everybody settles down to more or less mutual tolerance, with the high techies digging about in Phobe country for clues to possible energy sources.

Gadallah is a smooth enough writer, but a little more intelligence in her characters might make the story believable, and a little more originality in the plot would make it more interesting.

Spritely

Fool On the Hill

By Matt Ruff

Atlantic Monthly Press, $19.95

As anyone who's been there knows, Cornell University has a magic campus, with hills and ravines and suspension bridges and whatall. Cornell graduate Matt Ruff has taken this one step further in his *Fool On the Hill* and peopled the place with inhabitants to match. There are, of course, the students, especially a group of bizarre individuals who call themselves the Bohemians, so determinedly weird that they consider the Creative Anachronist types workaday. There's a fraternity called Tolkien House, buried back in the woods somewhere. There's the population of masterless dogs, whose presence on campus is endowed (this is, in fact, true) and who have a busy subculture maintained by a sort of telepathy (cats also included).

Then there are the sprites, the Little People (*really* little—six inches, stem to stern), who number about a thousand. They are invisible to the humans, but maintain their own ways and help out the University as they can (seeing that the alumni get their student loan

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repayment notices on time and such like). They aren't winged, but Zephyr has her own glider, and Puck has a hobby-type model airplane, modified to put the controls in the cockpit. A lot of them have Shakespearian names (in addition to Puck, there's a Hamlet, a Laertes, etc.).

Also include a fairly mad diversity of individuals: Calliope, every man's dream girl (literally; she changes appearance from man to man); Mr. Sunshine, a Greek Original (a phrase that, unless you're very clever, doesn't become clear until near the end of the story); two mad canine religious philosophers, Cashmere (a cocker spaniel) and Estrogen (a greyhound) who claim to be waiting for Dogot; Aurora Borealis Smith, a student from Wisconsin who is perfectly ordinary; Luther, a black and white mutt who followed the scent of Heaven from the Bronx to Cornell in hopes of finding his late father, run over by a car (dogs are religious; cats, on the other hand, are atheists); an insane Swedish chef who can see the sprites and who enlists them as cook's helpers; Stephen Titus George (S. T. George), a writer around whom the story revolves and who can, without knowing how, summon the wind; and, as the cast of characters says, Ezra Cornell as himself.

Now if you've got a queasy feeling brought on by the anticipation of a surfeit of whimsy, you aren't altogether wrong. What's worse, this is *college* whimsy, which almost always tends towards the sophmoric. And yet . . . and yet . . . Ruff pulls it off somehow. It's still whimsy—*modern* whimsy, true, with sex and violence and brand name beers. And if you're a whimsy hater, forget it—it doesn't transcend the genre. But it does manage to be clever, and endearing, and imaginative, and sweet, and that's what the best whimsy is. (Not cute—*never* cute.)

Don't get the idea that the story is just a bunch of unlikely folk bouncing off each other. Lots of things happen; enough, in fact, to give the impression of more plot than there really is. Luther, with his cat friend Blackjack, makes the epic trip from the Bronx. Calliope appears in George's life. The sprites stage a raid on the animal research lab and liberate a variety of animals (try getting a herd of white mice through a ventilator shaft), but not without losses; one liberated batch turn out to be rats which turn on the sprites with some loss of life.

An unoccupied Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant suffers a sewer gas explosion and showers four thugs bent on mischief with "fire, brimstone, and extra-crispy wings." William F. Buckley makes a speech. A mad scientist, or more correctly a mad Doctoral Candidate, who thinks he is Christopher Robin, threatens to explode a nuclear device. S. T. George slays a mechanical dragon which comes to life. Tolkien house throws a costume party in Lorien, contained in a

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domed subcellar of the building (which was endowed and constructed by a mysterious Lady back in the 1940s and the mechanisms of which no one really understands); it also contains the bridge at Khazad-dûm.

Worst of all is an event which threatens throughout the story and eventually takes place—*something* which is buried in the Boneyard (an ancient cemetary on campus), a murderous something which the sprites defeated and interred a century ago, is alive and about to get out.

In short, take some John Crowley when he's being comprehensible, stir in some Peter Beagle, and add a touch of Jim Henson and a pinch of Stephen King, and you have *Fool On the Hill*. In addition, Ruff is old-fashionedly and unashamedly for the maverick, the loner, the artist, and the underdog. And finally, while we old Tolkien hands may wince at Tolkieniana becoming common coin, I guess we must face the fact that his work has entered our cultural mythology (like Dickens characters, Superman, and Dracula), and must simply hope that it is always handled as lovingly as it is here.

Sister Act

Sister Light, Sister Dark
By Jane Yolen
Tor, $16.95

Jane Yolen is not exactly striking off into new territory with her latest novel, *Sister Light, Sister Dark*. Most of the story is laid in a culture composed entirely of women, made up of a number of "hames" which are fortified retreats in the backwoods of a medieval world. And her protagonist Jenna, whose life we follow into mid-adolescence, is, of course, "special." The circumstance of her birth and fostering with the women of "Alta's-Hame" gradually come together to fulfill a prophecy of a female savior who will bring about the destruction of what is, and implement a new order. (I sometimes wish a moratorium could be declared on all prophecies in fantasy for, say, about ten years.)

Jenna, on a coming-of-age mission to another hame, falls in with a young male fugitive, who (surprise!) turns out to be a king's son fleeing a usurper. And when she and her female companion kill the usurper's man who is pursuing the Prince, she starts in motion all the predicted chaos.

Given the *caveat* that Yolen's canvas is not all that new in its overall design, it should be noted that there are some highly individual brushstrokes. The main point of interest is the women of the female society. At a point of adolescence they call from out of a mirror dark "sisters," a twin for each who appears only at night and stays with them (usually) for their lifetime. There is nothing particularly mystical about these "twins" except their origin; they are full members of the community, and their personalities reflect their originals, with quirky differences.

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(Read the personified unconscious if you want to, I guess.)

Yolen interrupts her story with frequent interpolations of "The Myth," "The Legend," "The Parable" (all various interpretations of the story's events as told later), "The Song," "The Ballad," (verse applicable to the story), and "The History." The last is the most frequently inserted, as various views of the culture as seen by academicians far in its future. She gets in some sly digs at Academia, with its pedantically muddled view of the past, as well as some oblique inside jokes (citing "J. R. R. Russ' [monograph] "The Amazon Explosion," for instance). And at one point quotes Herodotus, which is confusing, since there's no indication of how this world connects to ours. These devices might seem an attempt to do a many-sided cultural view à la Le Guin's *Always Coming Home*. Some readers might regard them as roadblocks in a good story.

Retro Rocket

Rocket To the Morgue
By Anthony Boucher
International Polygonics, $4.95 (paper)

Someone should do a book of firsts in science fiction—the first time machine (Wells?), the first matter transporter, the first sex, etc. It would be interesting to see how old these now taken-for-granted concepts are. A peripheral first that I'm pretty sure of is Anthony Boucher's *Rocket To the Morgue,* published in 1942, which could well be the first novel *about* science fiction writers and fans.

Anthony Boucher was for a long time the editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* and divided his writing between fantasy and detective fiction. *Rocket To the Morgue* combines both, a murder mystery set in the SF community. It's a neat enough little example of the genre, with a slightly gimmicky solution which the alert reader will have anticipated, and an interesting twist in that the victim doesn't get done in until near the end. The mystery lies in who is making the attempts on his life, with a couple of side murders along the way.

The said victim is one Hilary St. John Foulkes, son and executor to the estate of Fowler Foulkes, an author who created a character as important to early science fiction as Sherlock Holmes is to classic detective fiction. As executor, he has made any number of enemies in the small—in 1942, *very* small—SF community. And the joy in the work for contemporary readers is the depiction of that community, slaving away for a penny a word from the pulps, avidly discussing the latest exciting speculative wrinkle that writing colleagues have come up with (for example, "the positronic brain track of Asimov's robots"), and wondering how much sex the editor of the leading magazine will stand for (the answer—"In a word, none").

In an introduction to the novel

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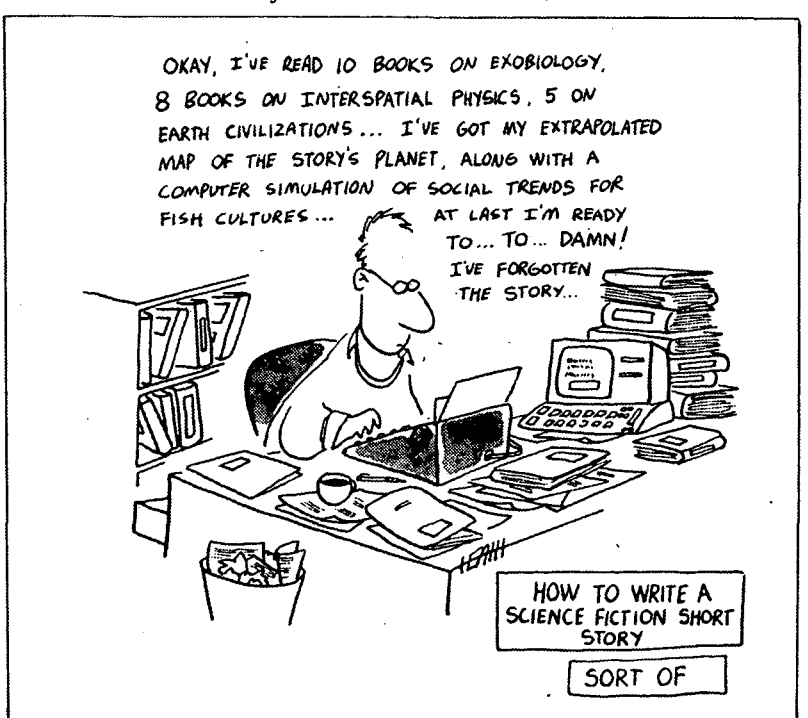
published for a later edition, Boucher says that none of the major characters is directly based on any specific writer. But knowledgeable readers will have a field day guessing the *in*direct inspirations (the married couple, both authors, the male half of which writes an ongoing series called *Captain Comet,* for instance). The above-mentioned editor is called Don Stuart (that one's a snap) and "Anson MacDonald" and "Lyle Munroe" turn up as auxiliary characters. Most of the suspects belong to the *Mañana* Literary Society, which was indeed real, the center of pre-war California SF society.

And, as a bonus, you get a few excerpts from the Captain Comet series, which are pretty funny stuff: " 'Quick,' snapped the lithe but brawny Captain. '. . . Take Gah-Djet, the mechanical brain, and travel at once to X-763, the maneuverable asteroid.' "

Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *Time Travelers From Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* (Ace, $3.95, paper).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, Suite 133, 380 Bleecker St., N.Y., N.Y. 10014.●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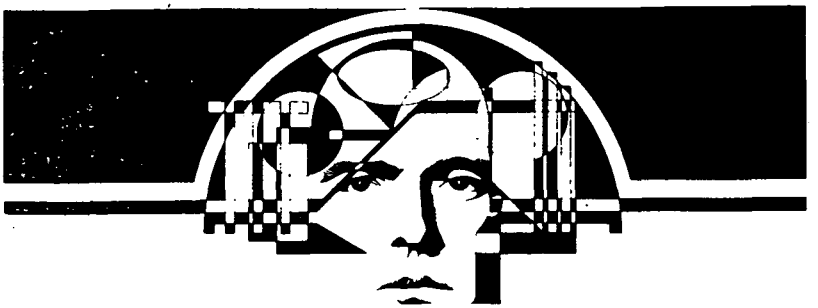

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Lots of on-campus con(vention)s between Spring break and exams. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 823-3117. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Early evening's usually a good time to call cons (most are home phones; be polite). When writing cons, enclose an SASE. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, with a musical keyboard.

MARCH, 1989

24-26—**NorwesCon.** For info, write: **Box 24207, Seattle WA 98124.** Or call: **(206) 789-0599 or 272-7320** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Tacoma WA (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: over 100 "pros" (authors, editors, artists, etc.). 2,000 expected.

24-26—**BaltiCon. (301) 889-3290.** Omni Hotel, Baltimore MD. C. J. Cherryh, R. Forward, Hickman.

24-26—**MiniCon.** Radisson South Hotel, Minneapolis MN. Harry Harrison, Fritz Leiber, F. Dyson.

24-26—**ConTrivance.** Hotel de France, Island of Jersey. The UK national con. Anne McCaffrey.

30-April 2—**AggieCon. (409) 845-1515.** On the Texas A & M campus. Close to 3,000 expected.

31-April 2—**StarFest. (303) 671-8735.** Denver CO. Media-oriented, with Star Trek movie guests.

31-April 2—**ICon. (516) 632-6460.** On SUNY campus, Stony Brook NY. Pohl, Joe Haldeman, Kress.

31-April 2—**StellarCon.** Elliott University Center, UNC, Greensboro NC. SF guests, wargaming.

31-April 2—**TechniCon.** Donaldson Brown Continuing Education Center, Va. Tech, Blacksburg VA.

APRIL, 1989

7-9—**ConCaTennation, 1028 Valley Ave., Knoxville TN 37920. (615) 579-3202.** M. Lackey, J. Martin.

7-9—**BamaCon, Box 6542, Tuscaloosa AL 35486. (205) 758-4577.** U. of Ala. campus. Gaming emphasis.

14-16—**LepreCon, Box 26665, Tempe AZ 85282. (602) 839-2543.** Hyatt, Phoenix AZ. C. Q. Yarbro.

14-16—**SwampCon, Box 14238, Baton Rouge LA 70898. (504) 342-1337/5353, 355-8246, 346-1011.**

21-23—**AmigoCon, Box 3177, El Paso TX 79923. (915) 542-0443.** Melinda M. Snodgrass, Kelly Freas.

21-23—**Name That Con, Box 575, St. Charles MO 63301. (314) 773-6626, 724-0291, 946-9147.** Milan.

AUGUST, 1989

31-Sep. 4—**Noreascon 3, Box 46, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139.** WorldCon in Boston. $80 to 7/15.

AUGUST, 1990

23-27—**ConFiction, % Box 1252, BGS, New York NY 10274.** Hague, Holland. WorldCon. $65 to 1/1/89.

30-Sep. 3—**ConDiego, Box 15771, San Diego CA 92115.** North American SF Con. $55 until mid-1989.

AUGUST, 1991

29-Sep. 2—**ChiCon V, Box A3120, Chicago IL 60690.** WorldCon. H. Clement, R. Powers. $75 in '89.

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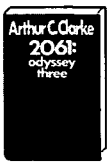

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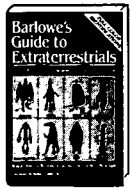

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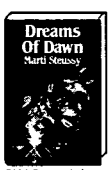

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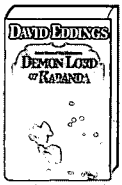

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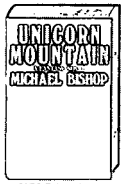

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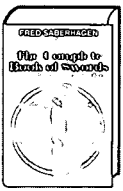

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